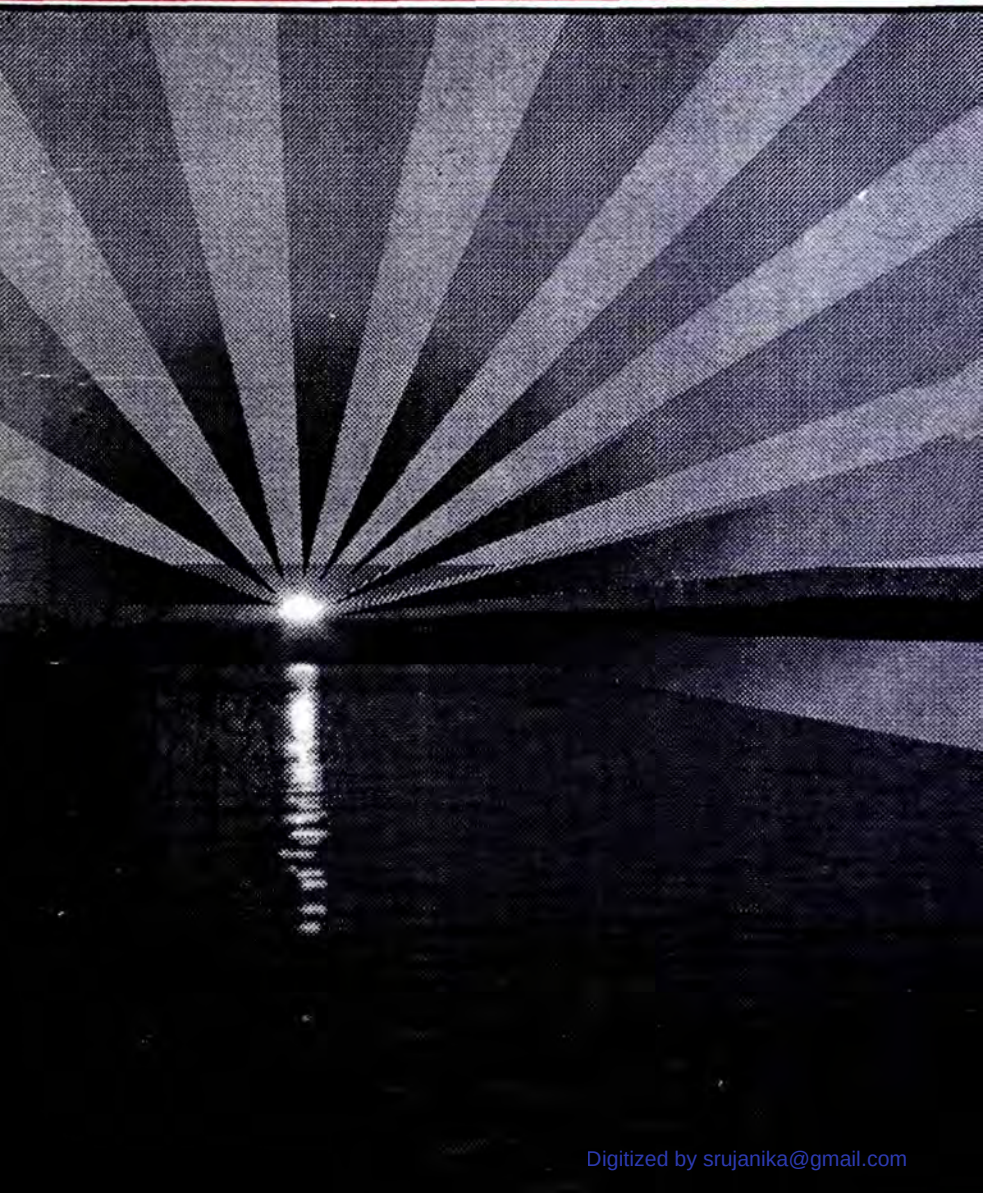
A BUNCH OF SHORT STORIES

by

Prof. Netrananda Pujari



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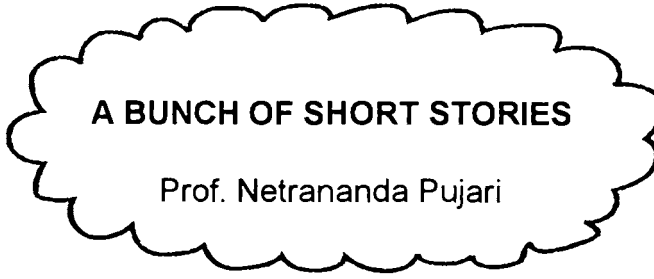

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A BUNCH OF SHORT STORIES

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*** DEDICATED TO ***

Late Sri Gananath Panigrahi
and
Late Sri Chandrasekhar Panigrahi.

Veteran Champions of
Freedom Struggle and Inspiring Social Workers
of Manpur (P.S. Bheden, Dist. Bargarh)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am indebted to all the writers who have given their kind permission to bring out the English translation of their selected Oriya short stories in this anthology.

Oriya short stories from various anthologies of learned compilers were translated into English for publication in this collection. The publisher owes a deep debt of gratitude to the kind compilers for facilitating the process.

My heartfelt thanks go to the D.T.P. staff of Bidya Mandir and the staff of Falguni Publicity of Bargarh for their generous co-operation to expedite publication of this book.

I also convey my sense of deep gratitude to my friends and well-wishers from whom I received valuable advice, encouragement and help in connection with this publication. Particularly to Sri Dayalal Joshi I acknowledge my special gratitude for associating me with translation work from the beginning.

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A PREFATORY NOTE

Translating a short story, a poem, or, for that matter, any work of literature from one language to another is a difficult as well as a delicate task, notwithstanding all the studies that have been made in translation as a discipline. A work may be easily translated into a different language but not so a work of literature. For language, through which a work of literature finds a form and a meaning, besides relating it to objects of every day life and ideas, has a tone, a rhythm and a nuance which differ from place to place, community to community and from author to author. The most important function of language in literature, however, is to communicate the writer's vision of life. And the writer does this through all the means available at his disposal-language, incidents, characters and ideas. Unless a translator apprehends fully the artist's vision in the original, it may prove difficult for him to catch the vision in his translation.

A translation is likely to be as interesting or fascinating as the original if the translator is an adept in both languages and if he himself has an artistic temperament which is in tune with that of he author.

I have read some Oriya translations of award-winning Kannad and Malayalam novels and found them banal, because the translators, being not properly equipped for the job, had no understanding of the artist's vision in the original. The motive behind such translations was not to make Oriya readers acquainted with the depths and heights of human emotions portrayed in the original novels, but to make fast buck by cashing in on the name of celebrated writers.

Even in instances where monetary considerations do not weigh with the translators and where the translators are scholars or poets of repute, particularly in the domain of poetry, it is a Herculean task to render the beauty, the rhythm and the music of the original into the translation. It needed a poet like W. B. Yeats to translate Rabindranath Tagore's *Geetanjali* into English and make the English version as effective and enjoyable as the Bengali. How hazardous is the work of translation can be easily gauged by the English or the Hindi translations of Gangadhar Meher's *Tapaswini*. How far removed and distant they appear to be from the original!

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Prof. Netrananda Pujari, who is bringing out this collection of English translation of selected Oriya short stories, was at one time my colleague in Rajendra College, Bolangir and I know that he is an adept in both English and Oriya languages. As a native of Orissa, he is familiar with the milieu from which the short stories have sprung up and, as a student of English literature, he has a good command over the English language too.

The short stories, all from two or three generations of modern writers, have been selected from a wide spectrum covering the whole of Orissa and each story writer chosen is an established writer, on his or her own merits, in Oriya literature. Not all of them, however, can be considered as the best of the species.

Almost all the short stories included in this volume have topical interest, the material having been drawn from the life and times of individual authors. However, only in a few of them is the writer able to transform the topical into the universal. To this category belong *Still alive* by Godabarish Mohapatra, *Reminiscence* by Bhubaneswar Behera, *A Spider's Web* by Raj Kishore Pattanaik, *Paralysis* by Bamacharan Mitra, *Mother* by Jayashree Sahu, *Darkness* by Sundari Uttam Chandrani, *Jhansingh* by Achyutananda Pati, *Actress* by Binapani Pradhan, *The Mirage* by Birabar Dash and *Mazdoor* by Krishna Prasad Mohapatra. In each of them, the reader is made aware of something deeper, something touching in life. *The Wonder-Worker Head Assistant* of Sarat Narayan Behera belongs to a category of its own where the author detaches himself from his subject matter and looks at it with mild satire and humour. A short story is not just a chain of events involving a few characters. To be a good one it has to go beyond the chain. And for going beyond the chain it does not have to depend on any kind of philosophizing by the author. This philosophizing, I believe, is the weak point in stories like *Balloon* by Purnananda Dani, *History* by Jadunath Das Mohapatra and *History of a Diary* by Mohapatra Nilamani Sahu. In these stories, the writers believed that they were not able to communicate the desired message through the plot and the characters, the warp and woof, of the stories and hence they felt the need to reiterate their ideas at the end of the stories. Every good work of art does convey a message; but no work of art can be considered good if it is created with the sole purpose of communicating a message or an idea.

This brings me to the point on which I have been requested to write this prefatory note. From my reading of the stories in English translation, I am led to the conclusion that the quality of the translation is directly related to the quality of the original. The translator seems to be at his best when he is truly inspired by the original. In others, like the originals, he beats the trodden path.

My pronouncements on the quality of the translation are, however, my own. Readers may find interesting and inspiring even those stories that I have dubbed as uninspiring. In all translations, there is always a scope for betterment and the translations in this volume are no exceptions.

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After having said all this, I must also say that Prof. Netrananda Pujari deserves and needs to be praised and congratulated for taking a decision to publish a volume of English translations of Oriya short stories, perhaps, the first of its kind in Orissa. No better way of utilizing the leisure after superannuation from service could have been conceived by him. His tenacity and perseverance, at an age well before reaching which persons are branded as old, are laudable.

The volume is a contribution to English literature as such; but it is as much a contribution to Oriya literature. Such translations of works in Oriya literature will definitely widen the number and nature of readers and the people of all states in India and other countries as well would get an opportunity to be acquainted with talented writers in Oriya literature, who would thus get the recognition they richly deserve.

In the volume, Prof. Pujari has himself written only one story titled *Historic Pension Case.* It is perhaps, his maiden attempt. The subject matter of the story has its roots in his personal life. He has tried to distill the wisdom he has learnt from his own life into the story.

I thank Prof. Pujari profusely for having given me the honor of writing this note.

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

A particular genre of literature that interests me most both in Oriya and English is story. As a Lecturer of the English Department for more than three decades, I had opportunity to read a number of short stories prescribed in the course, some of them being translation of classical short stories from French, Russian, etc. Oriya version too of quite a few published in journals attracted my attention no less. Oriya short stories have a special charm for me. English rendering of several such stories written by eminent Oriya writers impressed me as very powerful. I took immense pains to be acquainted with the technique of translation as an art be extensive reading of literature of this kind.

Regular publication of my English rendering of Oriya short stories in the "Literary Page" of the Eastern Times" of Cuttack from Jan. 1994 to Dec. 1996 accelerated the pace of my mission of translating into English choicest Oriya short stories written by well-known writers. I express my heart-felt gratitude to Sri Bhartruhari Mahtab and the Editorial Staff of the said prestigious Weekly for their kindness to give me such opportunity.

Some young and highly promising Oriya short writers of Western Orissa also captured my attention and English translation of their stories has been anthologised giving due recognition to their genius.

It is left to the readers both of Oriya-speaking and non-Oriya speaking zones of the country to judge how these stories in English are capable of yielding pleasure and radiating light so as to be readable and relevant to life and society.

My sincere thanks go to Professor Giridhari Prasad Guru, M. A., Ph. D. (former prof. of English & Principal of Gangadhar Meher College, Sambalpur and Director, Secondary Education, Orissa) for kindly sparing his valuable time to write a Prefatory Note for this anthology of English translation of selected Oriya short stories.

NETRANANDA PUJARI
TRANSLATOR

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Original Oriya titles of the short stories in the contents are serially as follows from 1 to 25.

1. Budhiani Suta
2. Acharye Thile Boli
3. Mu Paribi
4. Chorabali
5. Thunta Gachha
6. Pakshyaghat
7. Jhansingh
8. Maa
9. Romanthan
10. Mazdoor
11. Ebe Madhya Bachichhi
12. Abhinetri
13. Marichikar Dheu
14. Belun
15. Gotia Diarira Iti Katha
16. Tamasa
17. Itihas
18. Padosinka Kukur
19. Akhi
20. Dhanya Ho Burrah Babu Dhanya Ho
21. Pratisodh
22. Durghatana
23. Heera, Moti, Manika
24. Nija Ghar
25. Gatanugatik

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A SPIDER'S WEB

Rajkishor Pattanaik

"Man does not only see with his eye, but can also hear with it,

even with the nose. He can hear even when there is nobody speaking."

■

"Eh! What do you say? Man hears with his ears!"

"Is it then with his eyes and nose that he hears?"

"Of course! He hears not simply with his ears, but also gets answers from the mind. He can also hear with his eyes as with ears. Hence he is called man."

I had a hearty laugh. Do madcaps grow on trees? Surely not. It is this man who, as a result of repeatedly indulging in wild ways, goes mad some day. Just look at our Nilamani Babu.

"Why turn your look to me? When someone cannot understand the other, he blames him as a madcap instead of admitting his own stupidity or madness."

I burst out laughing again.

With a little excitement Nilamani added, "Well, listen to this story of the small man, the incident of the life and death of a petty man of suicide."

There was a pause, Nilamani would tell about a death or suicide. Where there is life, there is death. Death is also followed by life.

"Yes, why not you speak further?" I reminded. "It so happened one day that the man was fretting very much," he resumed.

"What for?" was my query.

"The man was not getting his legitimate dues. With his earning being short of his daily spending of two rupees, he had to take a loan of one rupee each day. That was how he lived his life. Credit was arranged in the evening and with the morning was felt the burden of debt. Coming evening would further add to the debt."

"But he got the loan anyway. How could he be offered so much credit?" I became curious.

"God offers it. Just as He provides for one to earn and save so does He allow expense and credit for another. What that man regretted and complained was how he could become a debtor with his daily suffering like this as a wage-earner."

"What solution did he find?" I asked.

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"He concluded that life is insignificant. It is all the same whether one preserves such worthless life or dies. It is better to make an end of such life."

"Ah! Did he then commit suicide?"

"So this is what you understood! Suicide scheme does not succeed without God's help. That nobody could materialise. Man cannot kill himself as long as God does not approve it."

"What was it he did then?"

"He used to think daily that he would die. He blamed God, man, one and all. He hated himself. One day..."

"Yes, what happened?" I asked.

"He was sitting in the cinema hall. The picture had just started. He thought of seeing it to its end and would then commit suicide. Thus, while sitting, he had reflections on himself, suicide and God.

"He rested his eyes on the roof. There was glass above and over it was electric light. The cinema house had been so constructed as to keep it cool. On a wall there was the light of glass-pieces just like window.

"He threw his look on a sheet of glass where a spider was spinning his cobweb. A part had been woven. It was not finished.

"The man kept on looking with wandering thoughts. He took notice of a loose tuft of spider's web in the midst of thinking. His mind was filled with a variety of stuff. "

"He could clearly see that God was present near the cobweb speaking..."

"What was He speaking about?"

"Have I heard it? This is what the man said... God told him:

"Just look at the spider. He has life. He owns a family and a home. He feels hunger. He has savings. There are his enemies. He is to die as well. He faces most of his problems that a human being has to... What is he then free from? He has no problem of suicide. The thought of death does not occur to him."

"That man, sitting on the ground, heard the entire discourse out. His eyes were on the spider. Answers to all his questions were passed by the mind. God from near the roof of the cinema house was in communion with him.

"He listened to and understood it.

"The engrossed attention of him who heard was distracted." Nilamani, with a laugh, remarked." This is no raving of a madcap or any madness. Man does not only see with his eyes, but can also hear with it, even with the nose. He can hear even when there is nobody speaking."

That is the style of God's communion. This is how He resolves the conflict of man.■

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As Esteemed Acharya was there...

Rajkishor Roy

"But you have given away everywhere, I observed."

'Yes, but here I could not', I admitted.

'Why?' 'As esteemed Acharya was there...' I explained."

▪

No sooner did the four wheels of the bus start whirling than a cripple stretched out his hand before the Dewan. Since he was disabled, it was feared he would fall down. Defying that fear, he used to run and beg with folded hands saying 'O Baba! Give me a pice. Just one pice please.'

X X X X

The driver could not start the bus. The Dewan was put to inconvenience. The bus moreover passed through his state. The driver was wo[illegible]. This sad incident occurred at the start following his offer of salutation to the steering wheel with folded hands. Consequently he got angry with the hapless beggar. He started abusing with unutterable words. The Dewan Babu also gave him support.

'These fellows are thieves and rogues making it a business here. Out you go! Be off!'

I had no two-pice coin with me. A four-anna piece was there which I passed on to him. The bus moved and reached Athmallik. I was saved from the trouble of heat, dust and sitting with pressed knees. Under the thick shade I got relaxed. A Lecturer friend was found in the Athmallik bus. Conversation ensued. He was a Lecturer of Science.

X X X X

'Babu, I am going without food. Give me something. God bless you!' As the senior chap uttered these words, the smaller one solicited alms with a reg.

X X X X

The Lecturer burst out, 'Hopeless! It is for them that the country is ever going down. As there is no beggar problem in USA all are active and able to earn. Offering any charity to them is as good as cutting at the root of the country's progress.'

Hearing words of refusal from the Lecturer, both the beggars turned to me. The aversion of the Lecturer dashed their hope to pieces. I got an eight-anna piece exchanged from a nearby guava-seller and gave away two annas

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to both of them. I left for the bus as it was already time. The Lecturer friend saw me off and boarded the other bus. Angul was the next halting place X X As I took a few steps on the reddish-looking road, the same ever-heard importunate words came to my ears - 'Babu! Give this blind woman a pice or a half. I have no son or husband. Pity this poor fellow-'

I looked back. A blind old woman was narrating her suffering with her hand stretched out before a famous Marwari merchant of oil-seeds.

'Get back. No help at all!' With these word Sethji tightened the dhoti around his waist still more firmly. I handed one anna to the blind woman and watched the Sethji for a moment. My ams got tinged with pity through his disdainful gesture and his two rough lips beamed with a light smile.

At a little distance a Congress worker, with a cap on and a beg in hand, opened an Oriya newspaper and presumably perused the message of Mahatma Gandhi' s fast-unto-death. It appeared that his interest was rather absorbing.

'Babu! Here is a blind, old woman. Offer something, please!'

It was not once, but several times these touching words came to the ears of the Congress worker. But the news of Mahatma's fasting upset him so much that the weeping of the old woman could not impinge on his ears. After a long lapse, he admonished in disgust:

'Oh, what a lot you chatter! Wait, let me light the biri. O old woman! If you go on begging daily like this, how can the social set-up survive. Saying this the worker turned to me and being pleased with himself for dropping a political term like 'social set-up', he delighted with a mild laugh. The old woman returned therefrom empty-handed. The biri in the mouth of the worker emitted sparks till the bus passed the turning of the road.

In a compartment of the train there were my fellow-passengers right from the Dewan to that Congress worker. The cold air of the winter evening got increasingly colder. The train slowed down its speed.

The Science Lecturer had meanwhile lighted a cigarette. The Dewan Babu smoked his usual pipe. It was therefore sparking. The biri of the worker did not cease burning as one followed the other. Sethji, the oil-seed merchant filled his 'cheelum' and went on smoking with a whoop of mild cough.

My spirit was avidly looking for light underneath the ink of darkness. I kept on gazing at nature turned dark. A star was shinning beneath the horizon.

With arrival at the station, usual din and bustle prevailed. But the noise at the station subsided, as though within two seconds. 'Who comes there? Who is he?'

Someone answered in a faint voice, 'Honoured Acharya!' This voice was again clearly heard saying 'Acharya Sir'. One could hear that clear voice saying still more distinctly 'Acharya Harihara!'

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Somebody else added 'sage like'-

Others paid homage to him saying:

'Bowing my head with regards'.

'Prostrating myself before you'.

'My obeisance with stooped head.'

'With greetings'.

'Let me take the dust of your feet.'

The response came from him, 'Well, my dear ones! How do you do? I had been to Dhenkanal with a mission. I asked the youths to call off agitation and they complied. That brings me peace. Moreover the Brahmins of Satyabadi tilled their land and all were displeased with me. So are you all faring well? Do you keep up spinning? Go on reading the Geeta. Whatever may be your ideology, remember that old leader of the people. Which compartment shall we get into? We may as well sit here. Saranga, book the tickets.'

Who cannot identify that everknown personality of Utkal? He got up into our compartment with a single bed-sheet in hand and a bag on the shoulder. Pleasing in expression and brave without any ostentation, he wore the same sedate smile on the face. He said, 'O, you are all here. Very well, sit down.'

The Dewan's pipe, dropping from his mouth, inclined backwards. The cigarette of the Lecturer fell to the ground through the window. The Marwari rolled the 'cheelum' below. Most gravely upset was the position of the hapless worker. He remained still for a while. The obstinate biri stuck to his lips as a result.

'Hullo, Bhanushankar! Why did you develop the smoking habit?' From a distance I observed that the social set-up of the worker collapsed with it. Being unnerved, he bowed his head instantly with a thud. The Science Lecturer suddenly asked him, 'Sir, can India immediately adopt the Basic Education Scheme?'

'Charitable souls! Take mercy on the blind man. The helpless fellow from begs from you just a pice or a half. God bless you! Give me, please!' The blind man went on singing.

With tearful eyes, the sage of Utkal prevented him. 'My dear, don't sing. It is painful. Take it from here.' Thus said esteemed Acharya and handed on a two-anna piece to the blind man.

The Dewan at once blurted out, 'Take a currency note. Keep it with care'. The Lecturer groped in the money-bag for a rupee and said, 'Have one rupee. Put it safely. What a pity! The poor are Narayan (God) incarnate. There are funds of several kinds in USA to help them. The Marwari opened the tied-up cloth purse and advised, 'Take eight annas. You will, I am sure, get more if you come to our godown. At last the worker brought four annas from his pocket

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and softly told him, 'Take it, Baba! Have it. We have specially to look after you with top priority, if the social structure is to be sustained.'

Meanwhile we had passed two stations. I was sitting like a statue in amazement. Coming nearer, the Dewan Sahib shook me up and asked, 'What are you looking at?'

'Nature. 'I answered. With a laugh he continued, 'Didn't you give anything to the blind man?' I said, 'No'. The Dewan went on: But you have given away everywhere, I observed.'

'Yes, but here I could not'. I admitted.

'Why?'

'As Esteemed Acharya was there...', I explained. Placing his hand affectionately on my shoulder, he remarked, 'It is a lesson to me'.

I reiterated, 'I have that only answer. As Esteemed Acharya was there...'. The Dewan Babu gave a close look at me this time and observed, 'Really you are a man of poetic temper...'

The train was speeding ahead. That lone star looked still more brilliant beneath the far-off horizon.■

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I CAN

Kishori Charan Das

'But his dream is for doing something worthwhile-something becoming a man. Who can fulfil it? --Can you??'

■

FIRST he greeted me with folded hands, but with daring of a sort on the face. That seemed to show that he did not come for any favour. I requested him to sit on a chair near me.

He had a rugged look and a bearded face. That ruggedness did not betray poverty. Nor did it show resentment born of neglect. One would have the impression that it was peculiar to him. Nobody would venture to smooth out the rockiness of hills or to shape up the wildness of jungles.

The hair on his head was reddish, each standing apart. Oil or cream was probably never used XXX.The stranger directed his look at me from the heavy eye-lid and said, 'I know you'.

There was unusual concentration in his look. It appeared that he wanted you to respond and interact wholeheartedly. There was no way out to withhold attention. I could probably have pulled him up saying 'Speak out at once, if you need to'. But that was not the line of my talk since I also desired to know him. I did not ask him the name and whereabouts directly. It was better to hear him out. His purpose and identity would slowly be revealed.

He went on, 'I have heard of your good name and how, with visit to the countryside in the sun, you are looking into the grievances of the people'.

I was a little disconcerted with my praise. As I was going to stop him from speaking more about it, I noticed that his face was immediately weighed down. There were doubt, disappointment and question-marks on it. He put back the displaced tassar 'Chaddar' on his shoulder and gripped with both the hands a paper-weight lying on the table.

His haggard and broad face came closer and the look appeared to assess my whole personality. 'But can you do?' He then asked in a soft voice.

His sincerity tormented me. Further what was torturing was that he was talking not just for the sake of talking or joking. I felt like exploding in anger. Who was he? Was he my father or leader? Then he reclined on the chair and with a kind gesture replied, 'You can't'.

He did not allow me time to understand the issue and added, 'You are young, strong and full of zeal too. But the vice of this country is like a man thousands of years old. He is not to be shaken. So many great souls from Buddha to Gandhi have made the attempt, but that fossil of an old man has not

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been hit at all. He has been sitting as usual with a laugh on his shameless face and speaking: 'I will live longer and be older still --'. You can't do away with it. We all share that vice-selfishness!'

Self-centredness! I felt as though I could hear the shocking sound of the word. All symbols of my authority such as the office, table, pending files, paper and pen, desk calender reverberated that sound. Self-defence instinct prompted me to utter the easily occurring English word 'Well-' That means he was right. We are all accountable for it. But how could it be helped?

He continued, 'Selfishness is ingrained in our bone and marrow. We became united for a specific period to drive away foreign rulers. We courted suffering for the country and the people regardless of self-interest. But now it appears that it was not we who were united but all our smallnesses got united. Greatness never subsisted in us nor do we currently possess it'.

I opened my cigarette packet and offered it to him before taking out one for me. But he declined with folded hands. X X X 'Don't you take tea as well?' I asked being a little astonished.

'No, sir! I left off during student days when I went to jail for the first time', he replied.

Imprisonment! Prohibition! I wondered and observed him again. So his ruggedness was connected with jail, lathi-charge, etc. Daring gave practice of disobedience. The concentrated look was the instrument for single resolve and steady effort. Coarse cloth , thick 'chaddar' --

Was he really a leader? Has he suffered and come to understand? And hence his maturity and disappointment?

Beyond doubt. From moment to moment his look bespoke that he was a leader. It was not that sincerity was unnecessary for him.

My impression was confirmed by him. He said, 'I can't give you my introduction. My name is Mandaradhar Mohapatra'. X X Someone was probably speaking at the annual function of the college. That he had good reputation was unquestionable. I intimated him that I was aware of it and humbly revealed: 'I have heard of you though no acquaintance could be made until now. However --'

He resumed, 'Take no thought of me. I am a cipher. Upon you depends the future of the country. That is why I have come to you. X X X I set that college on right lines with my own hands. An M. E. School was upgraded to a high school and then to a college. I have raised subscription from door to door. But I found that the college was gradually languishing before my eyes. There was groupism among Lecturers and students got involved in politics. Those whom I selected as worthy lecturers turned into high-priests of faction. Students passing the exam are fewer. Library books have been eaten by white ants. I have been delinked from it. I am told that you are on the Managing Committee. You have

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courage in your heart, several objectives and schemes in the mind. But as there is no respect for learning and people from top to bottom are blind with infatuation of self-interest, what can you do there? Can you?'

His resentment and hurt feeling might be ineffective, but not without basis. I found his aged face boiling with thoughts and turned my look downwards.

X X X X

Consistently he narrated several other incidents, instances of other missions and frustration, measure for health, co-operative and social reform. His eloquence and pathetic feeling on the last-mentioned topic became most heart-touching. He was going to leave. But I felt that his departure at that moment would not be fitting. So I requested him to stay a little longer. He complied and remained sitting.

I suddenly found relaxation and pleasure appearing on his face. Beaming with a smile, he recalled; 'By your leave, while looking at you, I am remined of my son. He resembles you in many respects'.

He did not ignore my query. "Of course, he is much younger than you. But he is an optimist like you and a dreamer at that". He immediately explained what he meant.

X X X X

He spoke haltingly. It seemed that he was thinking, but it brought on anguish. His communication was therefore inhibited. The words sprang up from inside with gaps- 'He dreams of doing something for the country- the dream of every worthy son- your own dream- not commonplace or of usual sort. I do know him--'

Being restless I asked, 'What is it he wants to do? How is he currently engaged?'

'Doing nothing. Sitting tight at home, he listens to history from his old father.'

As I was unable to follow, I pursued; 'Why! Service? Business?'

X X X X

He rose up. His aggressive gesture again asserted itself. 'Babu! There is no need of worry. He won't remain unfed. That is not the issue at stake. But his dream is for doing something worthwhile- something becoming a man. Who can fulfil it? Who is there to give the direction? Can you do it -Can you?' He spoke with a thundering voice as though he was addressing the whole world.

I hurriedly got my pen and paper asking him: 'What is the name of your son? — 'I had then no particular understanding as to why I was noting down all this. Was it for service, licence, permit or something else? But in my mind dwelt peace that comes with success. I have furnished the answer and the fire has been quenched. ■

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10

QUICKSAND

Ramprasad Singh

"As I turned towards Sarasi, I found her wiping out tears with a corner of the sari."

■

'You have been harping on the same theme of suffering, empty stomach and torn clothes. We are tired of hearing such tragic stories.'

'Then?'

'Then...? Is there no amusement, merry-making or fun and frolic in this world?'

'Of course, it is there.'

'So why not tell that story? Why talk of the down and out only?'

'I shall tell the story as desired. But you cannot follow it.'

'That means?'

I explained, 'The fact is you can understand the pleasures, fun and frolic or amusements of those with whom you have been brought up. But this pleasure could be had at the cost of the life-blood of a number of helpless people. Hundreds of destitutes had to pay with their hot tears to contribute to their merry-making. There is illumination for their rejoicing with the burning of fat of so many living human beings- all this is beyond your comprehension. And that is why you are happy. But what comes to my notice is the scene of a vast grave-yard of humanitarianism behind the enjoyment of the big guns. Ghosts of the famished dance there with the wild cry of distress. I am choked, Sarasi! My mouth is shut up.'

'And what about the poor you talk of? Haven't they pleasures? Why not narrate the theme?' Sarasi suggested.

'I am going to. But you can't grasp. The poor laugh and you look upon it with contempt. Their amusement is something ridiculous for you. Let us take a girl of seventeen with dishevelled hair and torn clothes. There are cracks on her body with dirt. On each of her hands is a broken bangle. Another is there- a man born twenty years back. His chest bones and arteries on hands are sticking out for want of food. He has covered his nakedness with a rag. Would you call one of them a young girl and the other a young man? You won't. Well, visualise another scene. The afternoon of 'Chaitra' is scorching. Both of them take shelter under a banyan tree by the wayside. They have been starving since previous afternoon. The man asked: 'Suli! Where had you been?'

'To that village,' said the woman indicating with her hand.

'Could you get anything?'

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'About two handfuls.'

'Have you seen Pattnaik's wife?' The man enquired.

'Yes.'

'How is she to look at?'

'Unlike others, she looks like a living paddy-store. It seems as if she is an elephant. You have probably seen her... Tell me how she looks.' The woman waited for an answer.

'The physique of Pattnaik's wife looks as though it is the trunk of that tree of three hundred years.'

Both of them looked at each other and burst out laughing. Let us leave the illustration here. Is it not humorous? It is easy to laugh and make merry with a full stomach. But you may not be able to conceive how much more powerful and elevated than the common delights is the laughter that the empty stomach could not suppress or the pleasure that grim want could not shatter.

Sarasi kept mum though hurt inside.

It was a Sunday afternoon. I was sitting and talking at Sarasi's home. She liked to hear stories from me giving her critical remarks. So she urged upon me to tell stories of her choice. Pathetic cry of the distressed is not in keeping with the drawing room of people at the top. Beyond the door-step of their drawing room is the place for the down and out or the picture of suffering X X X Consequently perversion of their taste is bound to follow.

Mrunalini felt that the Sunday afternoon was going to be spoilt. She was the matching wife of a capable lawyer. 'Don't you have any personal experience? Why not you take that topic?' She diverted the trend of talk.

X X X X

'A past event moves me deeply at intervals. Let me narrate it to-day-Uma was lovely,' I began.

Being encouraged Sarasi remarked, 'Now you have come to the right track with the whip of criticism.'

'She was the only daughter of Bhagi Padhan of our village. She alone was left in the world of old Bhagia. The old man's home was resounding with his old wife, four sons, assets of land and cattle. There was in a particular year an outbreak of cholera in the village in epidemic form. The old man's wife and four young sons died. All the assets of Bhagi Padhan gradually vanished like camphor. The old man and his daughter Uma only were left in the world.' I continued.

'And they had no food to eat- tragic story. Rotten old stuff.' Sarasi sarcastically remarked.

'Uma was beautiful. That means you may think her beautiful, if you please. If the daughter of a poor farmer can be beautiful according to you, you may

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concede. She had no facility to keep a blue, serpentine braid hanging. Nor did she have hair oil, shampoo, powder or hair-grip. Where was the space too in the house of Bhagi Padhan for a dressing table or a long mirror stretching one cubit above the head for interlacing the braid?

'You are mercilessly hitting out at Sarasi', commented Mrunalini.'

'I beg excuse. 'But Uma was nice to look at. Being the daughter of a poor family, torn khadi was her only support. It was doubtful whether she put oil to head once a month. Her beauty was natural and flawless like molten gold.

X X X X

'One fine morning I got up and found Uma standing at our door with a very sad look.' What brought you here, Uma?' I asked.

'My father has been down with fever of the last five days. He is in a delirious condition,' she replied looking downwards.

It was clear she had come for medicine. I had regards for Bhagia since my childhood. He was an upright and straightforward man. I felt that unlike a doctor I would not be free from anxiety by giving a dose of medicine.

'You may go. I am coming to see.' I told her.

Old Bhagia survived. Since that day I had probably an outstanding image for Uma.

X X X X

Small pox broke out in the village during that year. Scores of people died.

I was going through a newspaper in an empty room. The barber Dhania arrived and stood by the wall-side. 'Come up,' I said.

'Babu! I won't. 'Maa'(small-pox) has visited the daughter of Bhagi Padhan.' He informed.

'Since when?'

'For seven days last. A terrific attack of 'Maa'! Blood is coming out of her mouth. She has been anxious to see you since yesterday.'

It is probably for medicine. What remedy is there for this disease? It may be delirium.

'Let us go,' I told him.

On reaching her home I found that she had a severe attack of small-pox. Her survival was ruled out. She was delirious. There was worshipping of 'Thakurani' (goddess) above her head. I remained sitting in the house a little detached.

The atmosphere of that small house was surcharged with something very much horrible. It appears to be a curse for mankind to helplessly watch such human suffering without being able to relieve it.

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Uma opened her eyes after some time and turned her look to me. How charmed was her look! I still cherish that memory though a good many years have elapsed.

I came closer to her and asked, 'Uma! What are you going to say?' She looked at me entranced. 'It was not to be fulfilled during this life time', she spoke faintly.

Her breathing was coming to a close. 'Your leg ---' she uttered the words with pause. 'Away with it! Don't touch the Babu.' The barber Dhania exclaimed. She put her head on my lap and got relief from anxiety.

X X X X

As I turned towards Sarasi, I found her wiping out tears with a corner of the sari. ■

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14

THE WITHERED TREE

Dayalal Joshi

"Am I diseased or the society? Is it I who am starved or the society? Who is insane-myself or the society?"

■

WITH ups and downs, as like as human life, ran the municipal road winding its serpentine course as though for a rendezvous with its beloved, the HIGHWAY. On one side stretched a field and a row of trees stood by the wayside. On the other lay dwelling houses. One wonders who that noble soul may be that planted rows after rows of trees craving the blessings of the pedestrians, but modern civilisation has got their branches ruthlessly cut down for unhindered transmission of its electric and telephone lines.

Standing between two trees beside the road was a dried-up 'Peepul' tree. It looked as though with unpraised hands it kept on wailing, "O Lord! Pray ordain thou my going hence instantly. No more can I endure the torture of mankind".

Hadu, toiling his entire life as a coolie, was lately ostracised from home and the neighbourhood and lay sheltered under a nearby road-side tree languishing with his look turned towards the withered tree. He had come to the rescue of many people in the vicinity in their rainy day and offered help. But though he had fed several mouths, lodging was now prohibited for him in that very locality or any house therein. He had therefore taken refuge here facing the dead tree. He felt as though it were his 'guru' from whom he had received initiation and lingered there with the hope of receiving consolation from it.

It was the month of Vaisakh with a temperature of 114f. Summer wind was blowing strong. That tree was the only place for Hadu's shelter. The adjacent dead tree was nis solace. He began talking to himself "O God! For some ten days past have I been driven out from the locality. I have made sustained entreaties to you to be taken away, but to no effect. Now that I am immobilised, I am unable to beg and feed myself. I became totally unable to stir since yesterday. Whither shall I go? Why need I at all move? I was segregated from the neighbourhood by the local people. How could poor Phula help? How would she get along, if she quarrels with the residents of the locality? Working as a daily labourer, she kept me alive. How long would she thus keep me up? There was besides the harassment of the local people.

'But, then, I see nothing wrong with me. Why did they unjustly isolate me from the neighbourhood saying I was a leprosy patient?

"Don't others contract this kind of disease? All my hands, legs and fingers are quite right. I feel no difference. Never have I caused harm to others. What

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happened to me then? There is a feeling of weakness which is natural. After about a month's illness, I left home ten days back. I beg from door to door for my living. For the last two days I have no more been able to walk. In the evening comes Phula with food for me and goes on weeping. How very helpless she feels! I am however undone. She has to keep herself up. True, there are no children at home. Still she toils the whole day for a wage and, on return home in the evening, prepares food to be fetched for me. She takes from me the money I get by begging. That too I could not give for the last two days. Why should I then take food? Never in my life have I depended upon others. How is it that I feel this weakness towards the evening of my life? Maybe, God has purposefully sent this heat and summer wind to make an end of my sorrows and sufferings. O Lord! Pray get my soul transmigrated to thee. I am now invalid. Thou hast enabled me to get along half a century of my life with no support from others. Be gracious enough to look after me in this hour as well".

Hadu lay prostrated full-length beside the road. He would at intervals open his eyes to look at the dead tree and close them again lying as usual. Many people used to pass that way. But none cared to heed or take notice of him. They moved along posing as if they did not see him. All were busy with their own affairs. The boys, back from school, took a look at his naked body and went along with their jest and taunts. One would snap, 'A leper'. Another remarked, 'A starveling'. And a third used to add, "A crank".

He heard it all out, but did not utter a word. He pondered their remarks in his mind and began talking to himself, "Am I diseased for the society? Is it I who am starved or the society? Who is insane-myself or the society?" He would again slightly open the eyes and take a look. He then diverted his eyes from the boys and rested them on the dead tree.

There would be a flash of reflection within:

"Oh, legion is the number of pedestrians who have received shelter from this withered tree! So many birds have built their nests here and lived their life. Many are the devotees who have worshipped it. Countless goatherds have plucked its leaves to feed their goats. But how strange it looks that there is now nobody left to stand by its side. Not a soul to say but once - I grieve for thee. Only a few people are there eager to cut down its branches to be burnt as firewood. So many keep waiting for the tree to fall. A tree of gigantic proportions to yield cartloads of fuel. So is it only for self-interest that man is so worried? He would keep up his relationship as long as he can get his motives fulfilled. Is it this fact that repels the yogis, rishis and the enlightened who consequently want to be far from the human society? What a terrific resemblance between this tree and me! With infinite patience the tree, however, stood up raising the head high-for its final fall.

How could the political leaders with compassionate heart restrain themselves when this news was broken to them? Not that they did not earlier come across him. But since a teacher had invited their attention, something

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had to be done. Leaders of various parties arrived with cameras and took snaps of his naked body with a view to reporting it in the press as evidence of starvation death. The Municipality had remained passive which was gross injustice. The police were silent-a sign of colossal inefficiency. The Medical Officers did not take any action. It was nothing short of sheer heartlessness. The capitalists suck the blood - an extremely merciless act. There is no prospect whatsoever of wiping out he country's sufferings without abolishing capitalism.

Snaps were taken with the camera. They called to him. He listened to them silently. He had no more strength left to speak out. After a long pause he raised his hand to give hints for water. The leaders remarked, "Look here. The man is unable to speak being famished. Let us call an all-party meeting to-day and sound a warning to the Government in power. Here is a sight that no one can stand.

'Let us now stir. The sun is scorching. We have already observed the man. There is no more room for doubt. We must take some positive step for him today."

Hadu opened his eyes and saw that the Babus were gone. He heaved a deep sigh and lay stretched there. Restless with thirst, he was about to breathe his last. He again opened his eyes and observed that the tree stood imperturbable looking upwards.

Within him passed the thought-wave: "It is futile and a grave mistake too to expect anything from man. One should remember God in the last hours of life. Just as the tree is in meditation so shall I meditate on God immediately before my life flickers out. Since He alone is my hope, He can make me free from this trouble. It would be wrong to cherish even the least hope of getting anything from mankind. They are concerned with their own pre-occupations and obsessed with jealousy, fear, conceit, apprehension, doubt and desire. What can be expected of them? Precious little! They are extremely weak and despicable. Nothing do they have in their hands. I would not like to have further connection with anybody. I came hither alone and so shall I pass away. There is nothing for me to get from this world. I was born here not to take, but to give. I have given away according to my ability. I am not going to take anything.

'Yes, why then keep this torn lungi back? Let me part with that too. I am not to take anything from the society. Oh, how liberally has this withered tree given away! It has never taken anything nor has it expected any return. Why should I then take from others? Leave it...

'Poor as I may be, I make contribution. The donor does not expect anything in return. Why should I cherish such hope?"

He slowly turned his sides and stripped off the torn lungi. The body with which he was born was alone left. There was nothing else besides.

A mammoth meeting was held in the heart of the town towards the evening. Several speeches were delivered. There was condemnation of the Government.

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The Municipality and its Chairman were blamed. Firm resolve was made to exterminate the capitalists. Positive action was taken to forward to the Collector a unanimously passed resolution. They took steps to transmit the news and the photos to the press. With clapping of hands on all sides the meeting broke up.

Hadu could not quench his thirst. He had no strength left to endure the heat and the summer wind of Vaisakh. There was for him no opportunity to hear the discussion of the meeting. Had he been there, God knows how he would have felt. But he had earlier reached his destination. The scavengers put his dead body in the municipal cart and threw it away for the vultures and jackals in the burial ground.

The 'WITHERED TREE' remained unperturbed, as usual. ■

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PARALYSIS

Bamacharan Mitra

"The essential pre-requisite for anybody seeking to gain power, influence, high office, wealth or respect is self-purification."

■

Of late, Duryodhan Babu was always lying on bed leaning against the wall on the outside verandah. There was a torn oily pillow behind his back. With dilated eyes he looked up at the sky chewing betel. He had no ability either to speak or to get up. He was a paralytic. Whenever anyone pleased, he used to offer him a leaf of betel or adjusted his pillow or performed a little bit of some service or other. All inmates of the house were now disgusted with him. He had no communication of mind with other members of the family though there was physical contact with them. He was alienated, though not exiled like the traditional god of a family suddenly turned wealthy with worship of western civilisation.

He was faced with this situation just three days after he took pension at the age of fifty-five. He got pension after service for a long spell of thirty years. His was a very humble start in service. But he had been placed in a very high position at the time of retirement. He gained plenty of power, influence, honour and wealth in his service career. Still he burst out crying when he received pension. Immediately following the payment of his pension, he felt as though he was no different from Ainthu Sahu or Nidhi Mullick. When he went to the court to-day where he used to boss for so many years with salutation from others, nobody cared to stand up or throw a sidelong glance at him. Of course, it was not that anybody deliberately ignored him to show him disrespect. His honour absolutely flowed from his office. He had no other identity beyond that. With retirement from that office to-day, he was just an ordinary citizen. Still he walked up and down the court unnecessarily and returned home. He was mentally upset and got embittered. "So who am I now? What currently is my individual identity? All my identity is gone and in retirement now?" he asked anxiously looking at the roof from his bed. His eyes filled with tears. Someone seemed to speak in a voice previously familiar to him: "Sahib! A man has conveyed his 'salaam' to you". He rose immediately and found none. With that he came to realise that he was a retired officer. Nobody had further any business with him. There was none to call on him or offer 'salaam' any more. He lay on his bed again.

He turned black and got reduced more than half in course of two days. On the third day he rose from sleep in the hot sun and as he was stirring out, he fell down near the cot with a slip of his leg. He tried to stand up, but his hands and legs were lacking in strength. He made an attempt to give a loud call. His mouth did not open. He could understand that he had suddenly become a victim of paralysis.

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Nobody was then found at home. He had a second wife with an age-gap of fifteen years. She was shy with country manners when she married. It was Duryodhan Babu who made her up-to-date both physically and mentally. She was lately available at home for very brief spells. Visiting different places all the time by the car, she returned home very late at night. Meanwhile scandals true and false reached the house of Duryodhan Babu. When a controversy with him raged over this issue, she argued in self defence: "Let me know who asked me for outdoor life, get-together with one and all, drinking and driving the car. You looked upon me as a mate for indulgence. You are now old, but not I." Duryodhan Babu kept quiet.

He had three sons. Life is short and mortal. But eternal and living for ever is the stream of life. Life is followed by death. The stream, however, runs on for ever. Father is immortalised through the son.

"But what does immortality imply? Is it mere physical reproduction of life after life? Shall I be immortal through sons?" He was thinking it over on that day with the torn pillow turned aside.

He had a building, a magnificent one. But he lay stretched on the outside verandah close to the cow-shed. His wife, toileting for about one hour, was getting ready for outing. The humming of her song and the sweet smell of scent came out of the dressing room in a waft. She left after a short while without throwing a look at him even for once.

Duryodhan Babu's body started to tremble with mental torture. He tried to shout but could not. Violent cries of anguish alone were ejected.

His eldest son arrived at this moment. He laughed within himself and silently remarked, "Here comes the leader".

Though Duryodhan Babu's eldest son was not a leader, he was rapidly progressing to be one. He had amassed a lot of wealth by various foul means and was still doing so. With manoeuvring and diplomacy he was at every step rising to be a leader. He arrived followed by two or four others. One had a camera in hand. He looked at Duryodhan Babu with a smile and started massaging his leg. Though Duryodhan Babu was taken aback with this sudden change, tears dropped down from his eyes out of gratitude. The camera man took the snap in the massaging posture. "I am now going, daddy! Is there any other trouble?" queried the smiling son.

"No", replied Duryodhan Babu shaking his head. Every one went away. So the son came for a photo to show his paternal regard.

"He is my son, the image of one aspect of my character. I was adopting unfair means tempted by wealth and got rapidly promoted in service career through various forms of diplomacy. This son, born during the aforesaid period, is the outer embodiment of that hidden nature. Hence I am entirely at fault, not he." Duryodhan Babu again started uttering cries of agony with tears streaming from the eyes. He restlessly tossed his head from this side to that on the torn pillow.

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At this moment the middle son dropped in staggering with a wine-bottle in hand. He prostrated himself before his father. He burst out weeping and said, "Daddy! I have emptied only one bottle of wine since morning, not more. Still more is left. Will you take it? Have a little. It will be so soothing." Duryodhan Babu looked on intently- a son was asking his father to take just a little of wine. "Yes", said Duryodhan Babu, nodding his head. "Ha! Ha! Ha!" The son, with a lingering laugh, staggered out.

Duryodhan Babu began thinking: "This too is my character exposed in another shape. One day I also used to take wine before all members of the family and got besotted with drink. I once contended that there is nothing wrong in taking wine and that all families of every civilised country sit and drink together. That very self of mine has been revealed in the likeness of my son- that side of my character is thus imaged."

Duryodhan Babu roared kicking and fretting with anguish. He tried to commit suicide by gagging himself with own hands, but without success. He was mentally prostrated. Despite the torment suffered, he somehow offered prayer with folded hands.

"Pray to him, daddy! The only refuge, hope and fulfilment is He. Everything else is fruitless," remarked the third son of Duryodhan Babu as he entered. He was saffron-clad with a Chaddar on. A very meritorious student, he left off study in the college and ran away as a Sannyasin. That was five years back. Duryodhan Babu and the rest concluded that he was a disgrace to the family line.

But to-day the sight of that son gave him unending strength and consolation. He however wondered: "How could I get a son like him? So some faintly holy thought lay hidden in all my overt animal instincts! Where was it lying? Never could I trace it. Then is it that immortality? Oh, what a blunder I made!"

"Daddy! The essential prerequisite for anybody seeking to gain power, influence, high office, wealth or respect is self-purification. One who has no desire or ability to practise it should live like an ordinary man. Otherwise he does much harm to the society, however intelligent he may be." The third son observed as he caressed the body of his father.

Duryodhan Babu wanted to disclose to this son all his blemishes and weaknesses. His lips started shivering as he tried to speak. Tears dropped from his eyes. He restlessly shook his head.

X X X X

Duryodhan Babu offered prayerful respect once more folding both his hands with excessive pain. ■

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JHANSINGH

Achyutananda Pati

'My eyes filled with tears. A brute of the jungle has got the heart of a man! And, at the bottom of the mind of a nomadic man of the street, runs the feeling of a god!'

■

My friendship with old Lachhaman Singh started warming up with great intensity. There was the required normal attraction in his grey moustache, toothless mouth, wreathed smile and flabby skin. But I was very much after him for his pet bear Jhansingh. Lachhaman put up under the denuded banyan tree in front of my house. We were neighbours for some four months. For the last few days Lachhaman used to pass before my house humming something. Behind him followed his bear Jhansingh with the bells jingling on his legs. There would always be a song on the lips of Lachhaman. Of course, the song was not clearly audible throughout.

Hearing the humming tune the bear felt much pampered and, waving his furry body, walked ahead with swaying gait. Two or four stray dogs followed with barking. Some ten or twenty-five children, clapping their hands, howled and pursued. Occasionally picking up pebbles, they started pelting. Jhansingh did not care. When the dogs came very close, he slightly turned and gave a warning cough. The children jumped and fled away. Lachhaman would stop singing and look at the tree. With a murmur Jhansingh came running to Lachhaman. The fur hung on both sides of his head with a dividing line. Lachhaman lightly caressed the fur of Jhansingh with his hands. I came out of the house and looked on leaning against the door. I could not hold myself back when Lachhaman would sing.

I have seen Jhansingh dance not once or twice, but several times. If the hand drum sound was heard somewhere in the vicinity, I rushed out leaving off all the work in hand. Seeing me Lachhaman would lengthen the tune and make the dance very much lively. Jhansingh's dress was unique. The bells on his legs would jingle in concert with every tune. Lachhaman went on drumming in tune with song. Jhansingh, raising his two fore-legs like man, used to dance harmoniously with the hind legs. Though his claws looked ferocious, he retained them close to his body with much care. At intervals Lachhaman would start shouting and lightly tap Jhansingh's head with the stick. Jhansingh complied with a whimper. He moved the neck in harmony and turned round dancing. Lachhaman, with moustache raised and lowered, kept on singing.

'It's the dance of a bear.

The dance is that of Jhumar.

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How is the dancing? Pleasing.

Giving the dance swaying.

'Raise up your leg,' said Lachhaman beating Jhansingh's leg with a stick. Jhansingh howled and danced rushing. Lachhaman directed: 'Play on the sitar before the Babus.' Jhansingh, raising both the fore-legs, simulated sitar-playing with the claw of one. He would soon after spin the 'Charaka' in accordance with Lachhaman's song. 'The bear has to visit his father-in-law's house. Start with a drink, my sonny!' Lachhaman resumed the strain. Jhansingh staggered along like a drunkard. The fur on the back swayed in tuft to and fro. Then with a stoop he would be imitating a bride. The audience burst with laughing. The important moment of the show arrived. Taking off his torn coat, Lachhaman girded up his lions. With a crack on the thigh, he would stretch out both his hands. Jhansingh stood up on his hind legs and held both hands of Lachhaman with the fore-legs. At first they pushed each other a little. Lachhaman would at once snatch away his hands and embrace the bear. Jhansingh too took him into his fold. Then followed rolling each other. The spectators stared with eyes wide open. Lachhaman would at last sit down. Jhansingh saluted all in the Sahib style. He offered greetings with folded hands (fore-legs), going round the place. Lying on the ground, he showed his belly and begged money. With his fight he was tired out. He breathed so hard that dust began to fly. Lachhaman shouted: 'Beg, my sonny! Stretch your hands before the Babus for the belly (bread). Let their enemies die or be maimed.' Jhansingh rose up and, begging with hands outstretched, lay down as though dead. He would again rise and walk on with a limp.

Lachhaman got Jhansingh in the jungle of Orissa. He fetched him from Nilgiri Hills. Once Jhansingh, with an attack of rheumatism, was going to die. But he looked after him as he lay on his lap for nights together. With Jhansingh's mouth on his lap, Lachhaman fondled him, placing his own mouth close to his. X X X On being asked why he removed the teeth of Jhansingh, he would reply, 'Man is not trustworthy. He would hit you on the neck even though you feed and look after him. Here is an animal- why trust him? X X X

X X X Occasionally Lachhaman would go on fast at night too. When earning considerably dwindled, he baked and offered 'Chapati' to Jhansingh and himself went without food. On enquiry, he answered, 'It is the duty of father to feed his son. Babuji, how much trouble the poor creature takes throughout the day!"

XXX

The other day I returned home early before evening. The bear, lying at the bottom of the raised wall-side, had been sobbing. At intervals he used to wail. Sitting on the raised space. Lachhaman, while biting his lips, went on giving him strokes after stokes. He scolded loudly, 'You disgraceful, ungrateful creature! Would you kill me? The bear rolled on the ground. He would intermittently hold back the stick. I never found Lachhaman in such a fit of temper. Going over there I remained standing. 'Babuji! The rascal threw me

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down during the fight while I folded him in my arms. He is so much conceited!' He rose again and inflicted two to four strokes on Jhansingh's head. Jhansingh fell down on the ground and kept on whimpering. I was filled with contempt for Lachhaman. I felt that man turns into a brute living with animals of the jungle. I got into the house shutting the doors and deliberately did not stir out in the evening. I had no more inclination to talk to Lachhaman.

When it was midnight, there was a sudden break of my sleep. I heard some one weeping at the entrance. When the door was opened, the wailing of Lachhaman came to my ears from the darkness. I slowly moved to the verandah with a lantern in hand. Lachhaman, holding Jhansingh in an embrace, wept uncontrollably like a child. A flood of tears, submerging the eyelids, ran down his cheeks. Seeing me Lachhaman raised his sob and wept aloud saying, 'What a grave crime I have committed, Babuji! He did me no harm though I gave him such a good beating. Were he living in the jungle, he would take one's life, if irritated. With his living in the company of man, the brute has been humanised. But I turned into a brute though I am a human being.' Lachhaman could no more speak. Resting his head on the back of Jhansingh, he burst weeping loudly. 'Babuji! No more shall I linger here. Uneasiness assails my heart.' Lachhaman sprang to his feet revealing his feeling. Then he packed up his luggage and stood up. With tears in his eyes, he apologised to Jhansingh, 'Won't you excuse me, my sonny? I am sure, you will. You are after all my little darling! Well, offer your greetings to Babuji.' Jhansingh complimented him raising his folded hands. Then Lachhaman, giving his 'Salaam' (salutation) to me, got down from the verandah. My eyes filled with tears.

A brute of the jungle has got the heart of a man! And, at the bottom of the mind of a nomadic man of the street, runs the feeling of a god! I returned the compliments of Jhansingh and Lachhaman. ■

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MOTHER

Jayashree Sahu

"Kasturi was sitting like a stone- statue with streams of tears running down from her eyes. The baby was sucking milk from her breast with supreme satisfaction ".

■

Do you see Banaja? The position of Sashanka and Banaja in the Kali Yuga is the same as that of Devaki and Basudev in Dwapar. They were in fetters in the prison-house whereas service binds us in chain. A mother like Yashoda for their son had been born who, topping all her counter-parts in filial love and affection, became immortal for ages. Would God brought into being a Yashoda of that sort for the jewel of a son of ours!' Sashanka Babu fondly wished with an apt example.

Sashanka Babu and his wife Banaja were really too much worried. Both of them were service-holders with the problem that they did not know to whose care their three-month-old child was to be entrusted at the time of the mother going to school. Banaja's mother and mother-in-law were in the after-noon of their life. They needed someone to look after them, let alone their being custodian for the child. They had no female relation too to take care of the child there. No 'ayah' or servant was found though they made a desperate search. The problem could have been solved if Banaja would have left the job. Being helpless she would, of course, abandon the job. But Sashanka Babu understood very well what a rude shock it must be to her. Hence he did not proceed in that direction so far. And... still he made efforts thinking that some sort of a solution might be found.

They flashed their eyes on the neighbours. Their relation with all of them was nice. But with multifarious home work and botheration of children, how could anybody take care of another child, not of usual kind, but one with head still unstable?

Of course, one was there-it was Kasturi, their maid-servant. She cleaned utensils, supplied water and did sweeping in all the households of the locality. She had nothing to bother about at home. They were two souls-she and her husband. But... very recently she gave birth to a son who died. Her tears had just dried up, but spasm of grief persisted within. She remained indifferent all the time. Who would have the face to make her the request? Besides it was desirable to isolate the child from a woman of this sort. There is a popular saying that 'a mother bereaved of her child is a witch.'

There was, however, another woman- Auntie Rukmini. She had only one son in her world. When he went to office, she was alone at home. She was old... but she could still be approached.

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Auntie Rukmini consented unhesitatingly. She rather said, 'My dear ones, you are all my children. Who will look after your young one, if I decline? But it all depends upon the liking of that baby grand-son for me.'

The Mishra couple returned conveying gratitude from the inmost corner of their hearts.

From next day onwards the baby became auntie's companion in the lonely after-noon. It was just a three-month-old child. He learned to mumble 'Hoon-hahon.' His communication with auntie started warming up. She was out with the baby playing, laughing and singing. The child, with twinkling eyes, kept on looking at her face without understanding anything. He would at once start playing throwing his hands and legs. The child was not that well-nourished, bottle-feeding being his only sustenance. Hence he had a bit too much interaction with auntie. Three to four times a day he used to cry so loud that auntie's position was upset. While she stirred taking the child in hand, her dress would be spoilt. On her return in the evening Banaja went on planting kisses on the child and fetched him home. 'First take some food and change your dress. You may then go on fondling your sonny,' warned auntie. But Banaja heeded not.

One day the baby cried non-stop. Auntie moved to and fro with him to make him quiet. Kasturi dropped in at that moment. Auntie used to stir in sympathy whenever she met Kasturi. She had the doll of a child in her lap after eight years of marriage. But God, being jealous, snatched it away. The hapless woman!.....

'Auntie, let me take up the child for a while, 'implored Kasturi.

Auntie was startled. If she would, at the moment, go out of control recalling her dead son...

'No-no. You have so much work to do there. It will be late...'

Kasturi was at once touched with emotion. It looked as though waves after waves of agony were breaking in her eyes. 'Auntie, where is the time to weep enough for my dead son to drench the pillow? God inflicts only suffering on the poor like us. He would not give us time for grieving. Who will look after my husband, if I start mourning? Who will clean the utensils and put morsels of food into our mouths?' She groaned.

Her face turned wet with tears of sorrow and hurt feeling.

Auntie was bound to pass on the weeping child to her. Kasturi moved taking him here and there. The child became quiet. 'Just see, auntie, how he has stopped crying. Take up your grand-son now and let me go', said Kasturi.

Kasturi subsequently used to make daily visit. Taking up the child in her arms she chattered with the child and talked with auntie. Gradually close intimacy was developed with Kasturi. X X X Occasionally she said, 'Auntie, take a short nap. The child is in my arms.' She would slowly proceed homewards. Auntie initially got panicky fearing least she would start weeping with the child in her

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arms or... She could no more think ahead and trembled in fear. Rushing towards her home, from outside she overheard Kasturi and her husband fondling the child. She heaved a sigh of relief. Unfortunate! Though poor, they were really so rich in love and affection!

A month thus rolled by and the child was now four months old. His previous thin look disappeared and he looked so fine growing in bulk. He was very lively and went on playing flinging about his hands and legs. X X X

Banaja, with a laugh, said, 'Farex suits hem well. I have just started to give him the feeding.'

'Damn your Farex. What is at the root of it is auntie's affection and care. Her love is unique', remarked Sashanka Babu.

Auntie, in the eyes of the Misra couple, turned into an idolised goddess of maternal feeling.

The other day while her husband was on his way to office, Banaja said, 'Get an amulet for our sonny from the village- do you hear?'

X X X X

'How exceedingly nice looks my sonny! Had you been a mother, you could have appreciated the immense trouble I took to get a son. I would first pack off that Kasturi. O, the way that witch keeps gazing at my child! 'Banaja complained holding the child in an embrace.

Sashanka Babu being a bit brought down with this, said, 'Well, I shall look to it.' But he could not get an amulet despite her repeated warning.

X X X X

Once Misra Babu and Banaja arrived suddenly at two O' clock in the day. 'What! You are back so soon to-day? Was the sonny very much in your mind? You, both of you have dropped in'. Auntie spoke by way of joke.

'Where is sonny, auntie?' asked Banaja as she sprang forward with a laugh.

Auntie replied, 'Really . wonder where my grandson may be while it is so hot. Well, Kasturi might have taken him away.'

'Auntie!' shouted both of them, as though bitten by a scorpion. Then they rushed forward in one breath. As they proceeded, Banaja grumbled, 'I have asked several times for engaging a girl from the village, whatever may be her wage.' 'I have persistently prevailed on you to leave the job. Can a child receive maternal care from anybody else? Just think of the position he is in to-day.' Sashanka protested.

On reaching the cottage within no time, they came to a sudden halt and lo!... It looked as though the cover of Banaja's maternal vanity, with layers peeling off one after another, lay scattered on the ground. Kasturi was sitting like a stone-statue with streams of tears running down from her eyes. The baby was sucking milk from her breast with supreme satisfaction. ■

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REMINISCENCE

Bhubaneswar Behera

"He had reminiscence of having seen such profound peace elsewhere. That was on the face of Mini's mother! On the face of his own mother too!"

■

JAYADEV BABU was looking at the road seated in a cane chair on the verandah. The road was not yet crowded. It seemed as if the road, rising from sleep, still drowsed.

All were busy with their work. Jayadev Babu alone was sitting idle. It appeared that only sitting was his job. With a long sigh of uneasiness Jayadev Babu immersed himself on thoughts.

The strand of Jayadev Babu's thought was broken with some sound coming from the neighbourhood. He looked in all directions. The cow, sleeping not far away, had responded to the lowing call coming presumably from behind the house.

The cow, in her sleep, went on ruminating being quite care-free. Her closed eyes slightly opened at intervals. She fanned her face herself with intermittent shaking of her ears and tossed her head as though she was uttering words of refusal being unable to comply with someone's earnest request. Jaydev Babu's thought was directed towards the cow.

Cheerfulness was writ large on the face of the cow. Jayadev Babu compared his life with that of the cow. He thought, "In fact, how fine and free from care and struggle their life is! They have neither work nor any vocation. They comfortably sleep away the time and go on ruminating with closed eyes. True, they do yield some milk. But do they in return get any less food for eating? What would the cow do with surplus milk stored in her udder after feeding the calf?" And was Jayadev Babu fated to get such comfort? His entire life was spent in ceaseless pushing of the oil-crusher.

It at once struck him that the comparison between him and the cow was probably not appropriate. He was a bit disconcerted too. So should he compare himself with a bullock? He recalled that during his childhood days the Mathematics teacher of the school used to label him at times as a bullock and doubted whether he took rice or bran as food.

The more Jayadev Babu thought, the more he was persuaded that there was much resemblance between his life and that of the bullock. The wretched bullock toils from dawn to dusk, but does anybody listen to his grievances? If his master is pleased, he lightly strokes his body or throws a pack of straw near his mouth. Otherwise just like him he manages to nibble at the stalk of some plants from here or there or, tearing off the tying rope at night, gulps down

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some bunches from gardens of others before the watchman is up. Did the Government ever realise how he drudged from morning to evening? Not a word of compliment was uttered, what to speak of stroking his body. Was the pay drawn by him at the end of the month better that the bundle of straw? Had he not torn off the tying cord and fed on the stalk of the ochards or fields of others here and there...?

Jayadev Babu looked around being haunted by the fear that someone might have by chance heard what he talked with himself.

Right, his life was similar to that of a bullock. And what becomes of the bullock when he grows old? The farmer still puts the yoke on him and ploughs the land. He beats him, twists his tail, and pierces the body, if he does not move. If the old bullock can not work even after all other torture is inflicted, he releases him from the yoke under compulsion.

The comparison gets confused here. Jayadev Babu is still ready to carry the yoke. Not simply ready, rather he may be said to be keen and anxious. Is there any young man who, when yoked, can walk, keeping pace with him? Still he was retired, because he was fifty-eight years of age.

Someone in his mind seemed to shout: Injustice! Sheer injustice!

He tried to stand up. He groped for the stick of his hand. Though he knew that a rheumatic patient should always try to walk up and down, he again sat down on the chair even after standing up.

His thought was then diverted in another direction. He had really grown old.

Why did he then treat his retirement from service as punishment and not accept it as relief?

Is it then punishment for an old bullock to be released from the yoke? It looked as though all his thoughts got muddled up. He reflected, "Pity that wretched creature indeed! Where shall I go, If released? Has he a house or a yard, any field or ochard, trade and business, share in a company, house-rent, pension or offer of money for smuggling? Or has he a son and daughter-in-law, grand-children or comrades and companions? Nobody will feed him. If he puts his muzzle on the food of others, he will only be thrust aside or pierced. Does the old bullock still grieve for it? Someone inside him seemed to ask, "Why are you then so much worried?"

Correct! One must be as like as him and need not be unreasonably worried, fretful or grieved.

But how can he escape feeling sorry or getting angry? The old bullock does not have a world of his own. He has not given or done anything for anybody. What else can he do except being reconciled to fate? But what a great deal has he not done for these fellows?

That Abhimanyu was loafing about. With whatever education and brain he had, even the post of a mate, a work-sircar or a peon would not have been

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offered to him. Who put him in service as a helper for the truck of Sardar Mikka Singh? Who provided him funds for purchasing an old truck after he picked up driving and learnt to handle spanner, wrench and screw-driver? Now that he is a top contractor, he neither cares for the sun or moon nor does he discriminate between heaven and earth.

Who arranged for his licence to be a contractor? What risk has he not taken for that rascal? He made huge profit and purchased one truck after another. He put up huge buildings. Further he started hotels or opened liquor shops here and there at Rourkela, Talcher or Paradeep. Who gave him all the support and help? Should he disregard the Chief Engineer, his destiny-builder just because he is retired? With his indignation, the arteries of his rheumatic leg became tense.

And that ungrateful Gobardhan! He got the lift as Superintending Engineer only because Jaydev Babu retired and promotion followed. Has he, on any day, made a call to express gratitude? He was supervising work when the contractor did concreting with cement mixing three times the sand instead of two and six times chips instead of four. Was he not caught when he inflated in measurement the metalling of road from two inches to four?

Had it not been for Jayadev, this brat of a chap would have been downgraded to Gobara or Gobardhania... how conceited he is! Has he developed cataract in his eyes after being an S. E.? Even though he knows the retired Chief Engineer...".

"When will you take your bath?" asked his wife.

Jayadev Babu was startled to hear the question. Mini's mother had meanwhile come out of the house. She addressed him from the verandah: "What are you thus thinking over being seated there? You fall ill as you are not punctual in taking bath. If you take tea in an empty stomach with no breakfast, there is heat and hence the severity of rheumatism."

Jayadev Babu, without bearing with her, interrupted:

"Here comes the topmost doctor- An M.D.M.R.C.O.G. And her diagnosis is- tea heats the stomach and hence virulence of rheumatism. If I don't keep well, does anybody lose anything? Your son the industrialist grabbed all the money. Has he, for a single day, enquired after his father?"

Mini's mother was not prepared for this bolt from the blue; she was dumb-founded for a while. "Why do you always lose temper like this now-a-days? Have I told you anything? You have seen the present age. Do the children do anything for their parents? Everything is to be endured. Why be impatient? I am here to manage the household. You don't have to stretch your hands before others for help." She appeased him.

Jayadev Babu was at his wit's end. He was at a loss to understand what to do. He was upset by this imperturbable spirit of Mini's mother.

Jayadev Babu probably understood his mistakes. As he had hurt Mini's

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mother for no rhyme or reason, he muttered in repentance, as though in a soliloquy: "I made mistakes throughout life. What's there new about it to-day? For whom did I accumulate wealth like this? Am I to be thrust and pushed aside in my advanced age just like that old bullock trying to enter his muzzle forcefully into the manger of others?"

With the hissing sound of breath, Jayadev Babu, in self-condemnation, said to himself that it was all in the fitness of things. He had got a good lesson. For whom did he hurry and scurry and store up wealth with theft, sycophancy, running after ministers and taking up the Secretary's son in arms? He has been served right.

Mini's mother persuaded in a soft voice: "Swear by me to come along and have your breakfast after a bath. I have prepared to-day your most favourite "dosa" and cocoanut paste (chutney)."

Jayadev Babu looked at the face of Mini's mother. For reasons unknown he had reminiscence of his mother. When as a child he obstinately refused to take bath, sulked or went without food feeling hurt, his mother too talked in such endearing terms. She offered nice food and tried to coax him into good temper.

Jayadev Babu stood up gripping the outstretched hand of Mini's mother. He threw a glance at the cow again before entering the house. The cow had the same stamp of cheerfulness on her face. He had reminiscence of having seen such profound peace elsewhere. That was on the face of Mini's mother! On the face of his own mother too! ■

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MAZDOOR

Krishna Prasad Mohapatra

"Though unlettered, she had a heart and understanding power too. She realised that they were living a wretched, pathetic life like hundreds and thousands of Mazdoors elsewhere who were deliberately deprived of their right to live."

■

As the clock struck six in the factory, from somewhere near the chimney came the siren sound like a flute with a tuneless note. And the factory worker breathed ease with it. The sound of that terrific machine of iron gradually came to a stop. The road in front of the factory gate was throbbing with life with the noise of hundreds of workers crowding there for a while. And the market beside the factory premises slowly turned into a place of vast crowd. The wine shop on the other side started pulsating with activity.

It was evening followed by deepening darkness. Hara Sahu, after purchasing from the market half a kg of rice, salt and other needed stuff, directed his steps with nose straight towards home. A veritable young man was he with girth of remarkable dimension. He rushed forward with rapid strides leaving his companions far behind.

With a giant machine of iron he used to work for eight hours and got just twelve annas only. There was nothing left after meeting the daily expenses. He had to borrow money to provide for scant clothes. Still he was as free as a bird of the sky. He would never fail to make the best use of the leisure he got after being detained for work for a specific spell.

His house was one mile far from the factory. But with exuberance of joy, he covered the distance in no time.

He had a mud-hut. In the neighbourhood were hundreds of hutments of the same kind. In the morning Gouri used to sit on the raised ground belt in front. There would be a lamp beside her giving flickering light. And she kept on waiting for Hara full of hopes and dreams. On his return her world of happiness would smell sweet. Her sense of isolation of the daytime automatically vanished and the eyes with wild excitement winked not. The stream of love started overflowing in her.

"Beside the edge of the field, my dear! Runs the route, it is so very clear." She heard his lyrical voice. In the darkness under the low roof, Gouri's facial expression took on a different colour. On her lips would appear a roseate smile and in her eyes she kept ready the pointed amorous arrows. Hearing the broken rhythm of Hara's lyric, her mind was passionately excited. She knew that Hara sang that familiar song very near the hutment to communicate to her

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message of his arrival. His deep love found expression in his broken lyric as though it were the source of a stream in spate. And then would materialise the togetherness of two lone souls with the arrival of darkness.

"Fie! This is a road, you know", Gouri protested being conscious. She was not aware that Hara had confined her in an embrace on the open road. His head hung down in shame.

With the passage of time, series after series of changes were witnessed everywhere. The rich became richer and the poor poorer. The public leader, released from jail, formed the Govt. with oath to fight oppression and vices. But condition of the commonalty remained unchanged. Blackmarketing was on the increase adding to the wealth of the businessman. With leadership passing on to him, he would enjoy the esteem of his countrymen. But the fate of the Mazdoor was not to change for the better. He has been put down with whipping on his back. He would not be in a position to redeem his ancestral land mortgaged to the village money-lender nor would he make provision of clothes for the winter or rainy season. His hut has been found, gradually collapsing. With hope lost, nobody would be there for him to fall back upon. He had endured the oppression of the employer and been browbeaten by the Sardar. Though exploited by the businessman left and right, he has remained silent. He has not been able to raise his voice with head straight. One and all have been watching and also understanding his position. But none would espouse his cause. While monthly salary for others would rise from one thousand to one thousand and half, his daily wage was never raised from twelve annas to one rupee.

Hara, being a Mazdoor, lived under the same conditions as his counterparts. He left his village with the hope of redeeming his mortgaged ancestral land by saving from his earning in the factory. His house in the village had collapsed. But he cherished the hope of rebuilding it with the wages he would earn in the factory so that he could settle down there with Gouri. But that hope was dashed to the ground. The dream had vanished as he was severely hit by distress under compelling circumstances.

Hara was returning in the evening as he used to in the past. Gouri remained waiting for him on the raised ground before the house. Hara was not lyrical as in the past. He slowly went up to the raised space with a grave face having neither a smile on the lips not any excitement in his eyes. Gouri was surprised to find him looking so different.

"Gouri! Something unusual happened in the factory to-day." Hara gravely broke the news. For a moment Gouri was filled with anxieties.

"Gouri", Hara went on narrating, "we came here with high hopes, but could not save up money. With the price-hike of all commodities, it was pretty difficult for us to make our both ends meet. Our representation for increasing the wage-rate has been turned down and returned to us."

Gouri could read from Hara's face that discontent was writ large on it.

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Though unlettered, she had a heart and understanding power too. She realised that they were living a wretched, pathetic life like hundreds and thousands of Mazdoors elsewhere who were deliberately deprived of their right to live.

"So what are you going to do?" Gouri asked diverting her mind from various worries tormenting her.

"All the Mazdoors will abstain from work tomorrow and hold a mass meeting outside the factory to make a submission for wage-increase. If it is not conceded within a specific period, we shall lay down our jobs", Hara went on saying in one breath. Gouri came to learn that the wage would definitely increase with the joint efforts of the workers. Being encouraged she at once communicated the heartening news to Hara.

Next morning arrived with a difference from the earlier ones. Gouri used to see off Hara with a smile on other days. But he was going to launch a fight against the employer on that very day. With his victory there would be waves of smile on the dried-up lips of thousands of labourers. But his defeat would spell the ruin of the working class, the gate to Labour Colony being closed for ever. The siren of the factory would no longer sound for them, nor the market stir with life. Misery of the workers might multiply hundredfold. Full of apprehensions, Gouri threw a grave look at Hara as he left.

With the lapse of a few hours, Gouri's dream was dashed to pieces when vans full of police force with guns and lathis were seen racing towards the factory. She felt worried. Right from childhood she used to be afraid of the police and the fear still persisted.

Gouri remained sitting motionless in the same place till the sun started shining directly on her head. There was no end to her thought, From afar could be heard some sudden shouting. Gouri, standing on the road, turned her look in the direction of the factory. She found that several people were hurriedly coming towards the Labour Colony carrying a man on their shoulders. Heaven dropped down on her head. As those people came nearer, Gouri saw Hara on their shoulders with red blood streaming from his head. He muttered indistinctly: "Starving Mazdoor! March Ahead-"...

Gouri knew not what happened next. ■

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STILL ALIVE

Godabarish Mahapatra

"How such an ancient and great race suddenly turned into beggars! That humiliation how could the race, with life still persisting, thus invite? With eyes open, how came it that it missed the track! "

■

BENUDHAR could not make up his mind about what he was to do. When all the villagers left for the Relief Centre for help, Benudhar stood up silently on the raised wall-side and thought: "So many people are going there. It is not becoming of me to beg standing with an outstretched hand before all of them".

Benudhar, wearing the torn shirt hanging on the wall, stirred out very boldly on those days when everybody stayed back. After crossing the street, land and fields, he would be under a big banyan tree and sit there for a while. Closing his eyes with cool breeze coming from the green foliage, he used to think a lot. He imagined that he would have to remain standing at the door of the centre on arrival there. In which posture would he stand up? Is it with folded hands or hanging hands on both sides? Should he stand with a slight bow of his head or keep it erect like a hero? Would he give a smile or look on in distress with a dismal face? He could not make a decision about it. He started contemplating what to do in case someone present there was known to him.

The sun would reach the zenith while he sat down there and went on deliberating. There was no end to his thinking. He raised his head from the knee and opened the eyes as two squeaking squirrels rushed from one branch of the tree to the other in the deserted cluster of fields or when there was the call of a crow or cuckoo. But what he found before him was the everyday world. His hope receded further, just like distant mirage of flowing water. Turning his face, he saw the village Sireigaon at a distance amidst a cluster of trees. There was a national flag over a thatched roof there. It seemed to him that under that flag some volunteer, patriot, mother-worshipper, popular leader or comrade of the poor might have started distributing rice. Diverting his face to the other side, he saw Bagalpara in the midst of a similarly large number of trees. There was a small thatched house inside with a few inmates all going without food and none with a smile on the face. It was not for a day, but for five days consecutively no fire was lit in the oven of that hut nor was there any left-over of eatables. He closed his eyes again while thinking of this. But he saw another world within himself. How beautiful and full of life that world was! A youth of seventeen, Benudhar played, laughed, acted and made others laugh and act therein so much. He left home for prosecuting his study at a place where a god was witness for man. Proceeding with his study, he thought that he could wake up and awaken the country.

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Opening his eyes, Benudhar again saw before him the same old world. There was a premature stop to his education in that shattered world. The stream of his hope dried up and charm of life gone in this dreary world. He was out for begging to maintain a few souls.

Benudhar could not proceed onwards. He stood up under the banyan tree and turned towards the village. "No, it does not befit me to beg like this. What will they think of me if I go there alone, while others keep away? Rather one can manage to beg again in the crowd with a rag in hand," thought he to himself.

Still Benudhar was at a loss to understand what course to follow. Days rolled by like flowing water-one, two, four, even eight days passed. He saw that hundreds of top people of his village, floating in that stream with their stomachs, skeletons and rags exposed, reached the door of the rice distribution centre of Sireigaon. The handful of rice each received there needed no boiling. With the ground and above parched in the sun, the stomach within was boiling and, unable to control it, they impatiently filled their mouths with handfuls of rice.

Benudhar got back home not simply on that day, but for ten days on end he stirred out and kept on returning. There is a limit to everything. But Benudhar exceeded that limit. How could it be possible to remain within the bounds when not even a grain of broken rice was available at home? Finally he presented himself one day at the centre.

(II)

The Relief Centre of Sireigaon was a magnificent museum of the famine-monster. Sirei was resounding with the embittered cries of lakhs of men and women of a state where the banner of the Saviour of the Fallen fluttered for ages over stupendous piles of stones. The supreme sannyasin "Utkalmani" of the land, where God himself is said to have moved on foot to bear witness for man, was present there to take evidence of poverty and suffering.

Sirei may be said to have turned into a huge burial ground by then. The half-dead people could not make sure whether they would die there or survive. They had no lustre in the eyes or smile on the face. Nobody had strength in the leg or food in his stomach or a rag on the waist. They had only a terrible voice in the mouth. All were crying, "Give us..... give us."

Benudhar stood up in their midst. His ears were stunned with that sound. The scene blurred his vision. He did not like standing there as one among them. He wished to be merged somewhere without being noticed by the people or to stand, if possible, at a place with the face hidden or to get lost somewhere being mad.

Coming back, he sat down on a stone under a tree affectionately grown by someone and only kept on gazing. He wondered: "How such an ancient and great race suddenly turned into beggars! That humiliation how could this race, with life still persisting, thus invite? With eyes open, how came it that it missed the track!"

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He recalled that he used to read his lessons at the time of dawn like this. Were the seeds of education sown in the minds of hundreds and hundreds of adolescents under the ever-green Bakul and Chhuriana trees to grow with the ultimate result of making them beggars? Was it for this outcome that Benudhar held his book in hand for reading?

It was not clear to Benudhar whether he was in person there or not. He was searching himself. His eyes, mind and thoughts remained within him. His body alone was there at the bottom of a tree of the village Sirei. The people were coming back with their rice and there was thinning of the crowd. It was getting increasingly hotter. But Benudhar, lost in himself, sat at the bottom of the tree.

(III)

The touch of hot wind or the pathetic cooing of the dove could not shatter the illusion of Benudhar. It looked as though the tree had been standing there since long without speaking to anybody. Benudhar, without begging anything from others, sat under it from early morning.

"Babu, what village are you from?" someone asked him.

The query being made five to ten times like this, Benudhar, raising his face, looked up. That made one feel as if a stone statue of Konark, resisting for ages water, wind, heat and cold, lay there and life suddenly vibrated in its inert body at someone's call.

"Where is your village? Have you received rice?" Benudhar was interrogated again. He kept on gazing as usual.

Then the inquiring person slowly came closer to him. The touch of a cool, soft hand was felt in the back. It seemed as though that touch, passing through the shirt on the back, the skin of the body as well as the blood, flesh and bone under the skin, thrilled some inmost part of Benudhar. His body had a shivering sensation. There was tremor of his eye-lids. Then with his eyes becoming gradually wet, two drops of tears, trickling down, fell on the ground. He made an attempt to speak something, but there was twitching in the corner of his lips.

That person enquired, "Babu, have you taken rice?"

"No" was the only reply.

"Will you take it?" he further asked.

"No, not for that have I come," came the answer.

"Then, what for...?" the enquirer pursued.

Benudhar could no longer restrain himself. He burst out crying copiously giving the only remark:

"Sitting at your feet at the bottom of a tree like this I have, I suppose, heard it said by you:

'As long as life lasts, my brothers,

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We must not stretch our hands as beggars.

Shall we not live like man worth the name

some day or other?'

With this observation Benudhar collapsed at his feet as though with a breakdown.

Then..... A long pause followed. That great man of placid and magnanimous temper, placing his hand on the head of seated Benudhar, remained standing for quite a long spell steadily resting his eyes on the considerably distant, far-off limit of the horizon. Two streams of tears came down dripping from his glistening, dark curls of beard. On opening his closed eyes, he found the volunteer calling him and Benudhar lying on the ground like a stone. From his mouth came the words:

THIS RACE IS STILL ALIVE! ■

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ACTRESS

Beenapani Pradhan

'Karabi, the actress, turned into a housewife, ...The train was about to start. And Suravi...? Nature in the sky, woods and the horizon began to weep with tears like 'Pouring Sravan.'

■

"A maiden like you should not be an actress, Su! Don't be obstinate." Prabal began to admonish her in a wounded tone.

Suravi could not restrain her tears and defended herself: 'As you are well aware, with the abolition of Zamindari we have no other source of income to fall back upon, Prabal. And the flowery bower of our pleasures is to be maintained with full freshness. As the eldest issue, the responsibility is entirely mine.'

The bright-complexioned Prabal turned red with excitement and contended, 'Keep quiet. I admit that the creeper of your body blooms with the 'Champa' of charm. But why do you forget that there is no need for you to be an actress? The artificial plastic flower does not suit you, Su! It would be befitting for a maiden like you to be a house-wife, a mother, a wife and not an actress.'

Suravi went on listening to him.

What! Prabal was speaking in such vein! A refined youth of taste, Prabal too had such passion for dreaming. Here was a singular rhythm of the primordial instinct. She was charmed. Whether it was in the fitness of things or not was not to be considered here. It was meaningless to enter into a debate. She resolved not to disobey Prabal. And Prabal gave a very wonderful laugh that day. His bright face glittered with the rich stamp of a rainbow. His eyes spoke in a language at once charming and green.

Her abortive attempt to avoid being a theatre star did no upset her. Rather her fitness for it gave her a feeling of relief. For the first time, Suravi, the maiden of delicate frame, started loving her physical features with a vengeance.

Looking up at the colour of the sky in the month of Falgun, she was reminiscing about the lyrics of the last few springs. The past had faded out. But against its background stood the pyre of reminiscences unique of their kind. She was in flames. She had been burnt in the flames too. That fire did not, of course, generate heat. It rather yielded satisfaction. The corpse in the funeral pyre seeks salvation. But what about Suravi caught in the flames? She wanted to be bound in ties. Being consumed by the fire within, she sought solace.

That Prabal... he was coming back after a long gap of four years... four years that witnessed terrific change. Friendly relation cut off for four years was again going to be restored! The bell was gone for the train to arrive. Suravi too came to normal and stirred out of the waiting room. Prabal, with his higher

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education, had found employment as well. Did the reminiscence of Suravi in distress really come on to him?

Suravi was startled with her thoughts. She was pestered with too many apprehensions.

'Suravi!'

She diverted her look. Prabal stood in front and... she wiped her eyes with the handkerchief to overcome her feeling of surprise. Dreaming on the platform was entirely ruled out. Hence there was no mistaking the fact. It was Karabi, the actress, the friend of Prabal. An ocean of tears washed away from her eyes the collyrium she had painted with pleasure. They probably scented intimacy in her gestures. In a voice punctuated by sympathy, Prabal began to speak, 'Please excuse us, Suravi. We have had no time to intimate you. We recently got married after courtship. And to-day we are bound... at least for Bombay. And what about you...?

Suravi was getting dumb-founded.

There were pearls of laughter on the lips of Karabi reddened with rose and lipstick. She had annexed the place of Su and Suravi had been dislodged. With mind hurt, her (Suravi's) wound became deeper.

'That query was uncalled for, Prabal Babu. I don't need your sympathy for my shattered dream.' Suravi answered back.

She felt like crying aloud. But there was Karabi in front of her. The spring air was delighted by the scent of Karabi, the housewife!

She was coming back hastening her steps.

Karabi, the actress, turned into a house-wife. But what about her...?

There was a day when she too wanted no less.

The train was about to start. And Suravi...? Nature in the sky, woods and the horizon began or weep with tears like 'Pouring Sravan'. ■

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THE MIRAGE

Birabar Dash

"Ratanlal was moved to tears on that day- tears that kept running in a stream from his eyes. He was seething with grievances. Here is a strange world wherein such scenes are witnessed as were once conceived as impossible ".

■

He was a strange man who would search every nook and corner of the town to find the house where someone was going to die. Whenever death occurred anywhere in the town, detailed report reached his ears like corpse coming to the notice of a hawk. His ears always seemed to vibrate with the refrain "The name Ram is the truth". Occasionally he would dream at night that someone was dead and the coffin-bearers carried the dead body to the burial ground. With that he woke up at once and rushed to the graveyard. He would make a round and come back. That gave him peace and consolation.

Ratanlal knew the job to be done following the shifting of the corpse from the coffin to the graveyard. He would be busy collecting the clothes from the coffin. It did not repel him. The coffin was carried or dragged very far along the river-bank. He washed the clothes with utmost care and dried them on the mid-river islet. He would then sell them to the lepers living in hutments on the islet. With the sale-proceeds he used to buy rice, dal, vegetable, etc. and thus made provision for himself. Peculiar was his world- unusual were his ways.

Someone young or old was bound to die in a large town like this. Of this he was strongly convinced... In fact this was the way he was living for the past twenty-five years.

Near the river-bank stood a shed with a pucca roof. That was the place of his shelter- his bed-room, kitchen, sitting room all in one. Thirty years back the wife of a Bengali Babu passed away in the hot sun of the month of Vaisakh. When her dead body was taken to the burial ground, he found there no facility for taking shelter. He had therefore got this rest-shed constructed there so that others coming to the burial ground in future would not face similar difficulty. Since then the pall-bearers used to take shelter in that shed whenever they went to the graveyard for the funeral of any dead person. It was however occupied by Ratanlal for the past several years. His possession excited no jealousy in others. He had neither friend nor foe in this world. It appeared that he had no cause for any worry or botheration too.

I happened to come across him one day when I was out for an evening stroll on the riverbank. Inviting Ratanlal I sat down on a sand dune. It was probably for the first time that he had ever been affectionately invited to sit near someone. He could not therefore ignore my call of affection. Ratanlal seemed to be in the same position as is that of shrinking pupils facing a teacher.

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- 'Well, Ratanlal! What's going-on to-day? Anybody served with a warrant from Yama?'

- 'Yes, Sir! A child of one and a half years died in the locality inhabited by the people of Goud caste. His relatives threw away the dead body on the sand and went away. Just see there!'

-'What the hell shall I do looking at it? I replied.

- 'That's not the thing, Sir! Somehow I have been emotionally upset since I saw the child- I am restless.'

- 'I hear something surprising from you to-day'.

- 'What is there, Sir, to be astonished at? I am also a man like you whatever may be the angle from which you look at me. I too had a family just like you. I am however undone owing to my misfortune'. He groaned with tearful eyes and looked steadfastly at me.

- 'How strange it is to find tears streaming from your eyes, Ratan! Astonishing indeed is the welling up of tears in the eyes of a man who earns his livelihood by taking away the clothes of dead bodies that delight him with the prospect of fetching some money.'

- 'I concede, Sir, that not only you, but also the people of the whole town label me as a fiend, a ghost sans mercy. I have myself experienced it, though not disclosed to others. What use is it discussing with others? Will anybody be ever convinced if I would contradict my being a fiend? That would never be. Hence I keep quiet. Do you know my story?... Just twenty-five years back a child like the one you find there, Sir, exactly the same in all respects, with similar look, hands, legs and face...' I listened to him with interest.

He then kept silent for along spell. With this change of his mood I became curious. I was rather seized with a feeling of more surprise. Nobody ever discovered through the countenance of Ratanlal that he had a heart susceptible to feelings nor could it be expected of him with such dealings as he had. Ratanlal was moved to tears on that day- tears that kept running in a stream from his eyes. He was seething with grievances. Here is a strange world wherein such scenes are witnessed as were once conceived as impossible. Ratanlal, seated there, narrated in an anguished tone the story of his past life.

'The incident occurred years back, Sir! Though stale to others, it still looks quite fresh for me. The country has witnessed the abolition of monarchy followed by establishment of republican government. A huge number of schools, colleges, roads, bridges and factories have come up in the country. Those who suffered imprisonment are ministers or Governors to-day. But I have not witnessed any change in my position. I owned a house near Chowk Bazar of Allahbad and plied a horse-carriage as a coachman. One day countless people had gathered in the field facing the Chowk Bazar for a mammoth meeting due to be held at four in the evening. The official hierarchy prevented the people from attending the meeting being held at the instance of Gandhi. I was then

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moving from the station carrying in my coach a man with a Gandhi cap on. Some policemen with guns stood before me and commanded' 'Halt.' My coach was detained. The Babu who was sitting in the coach was hand-cuffed and dragged away. A constable took me to the Police Station along with the coach. Carrying that gentleman in the coach was the offence I had committed. That crime landed me in jail for four months. I was the only earning member in my family with a wife and three children. While I was in jail, the Head Warder sent for prisoner No. 22 that was me. I saw through the iron railing of the prison my wife carrying the dead body of my son...

X X X X

'Released from jail I returned home and found it empty. I have been in search of these corpses since then expecting to trace among them some woman possibly resembling my wife or a child probably looking like my son. With the sight of this child comes to me the reminiscence of my son'. I found that I was also weeping along with him. ■

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BALLOON

Dr. Purnananda Dani

"Pestering them at the bottom of the mind were their vanity and grievances. They were worried that the balloon, filled with more air than necessary, bursts."

■

EVERYBODY knows that the balloon bursts, if it is filled with more air than necessary. Women too know it. Ladies like Banalata, Pratibha, Chandrika and others were also aware of it. Still...

Now the women of the colony had a get-together on that day in the afternoon as usual on other days. It would not be right to call them women. They were educated ladies. What the colony meant was just four or six quarters. Chinmaya Babu, the Munsif of the local Civil Court, was provided with quarters in this colony. His wife Banalata, though a B. A., could not get any employment. Raghunath Babu was a Deputy Collector. He got quarters in this colony with a lot of difficulty. Pratibha, his wife was an M. A. who still hoped to get the post of a Lecturer. Sarat Babu was a Lecturer who was somehow allotted quarters with so much lobbying. Otherwise he would have been driven from pillar to post. While doing her B. A., his wife Chandrika got married with availability of a groom even though she had a strong desire to continue her study. Of this description was the colony. While someone had one child, another had two. After their husbands left for office, etc. they had their daily sitting at the house of Pratibha at one time or at Chandrika Dei's at another. What else in the alternative would the ladies do for the entire afternoon? They were educated and servants were there at home. The small child would be either asleep or at the convent school. What was there to be done in the afternoon?

That day the get-together was, however, at Banalata's residence. Pratibha Dei and Chandrika Dei contacted each other and arrived. 'Hello, come in. Get in, please!' Said Banalata and switching on the ceiling fan seated them on the sofa. She continued, 'You see it is so hot that one can't pull on without an air-cooler any longer. The ceiling fan no more serves the purpose. My mate was speaking of getting the air-cooler by any means either this month or next. Further, don't you see I have warned him I can't manage at all without an air-cooler? It is so hot from March itself. The whole summer is there to follow-' Saying this she too sat on the sofa and called out, 'Shanta! Hear me, Shanta!' Shanta, the domestic maid-servant, came along and remained standing. To Pratibha and Chandrika Die Banalata suggested, 'Why take Coffee in the hot sun? Let us drink squash. Orange, pine-apple or lemon? Let it be lemon squash.' Pratibha and Chandrika Dei nodded their heads. Banalata directed Ayah Shanta: 'Followed. Get three glasses of lemon squash.' As Shanta left, Pratibha remarked, 'Don't you know it is difficult to get a good ayah at present? Who can you rely upon? A maid-servant today is gone tomorrow. What she

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does is cleaning utensils or sweeping the house. I myself do cooking. It is not difficult either, since there is a gas oven. With the pressure cooker the job is over within forty-five minutes. My mate does not find food tasteful if I personally don't cook it. My son has been admitted in the kinder-garten school this time. If he does not find a good maid-servant, I cannot look after all the domestic affairs any more.'

Pratibha was yet to wind up her talk when Chandrika Dei interrupted, 'Right, how can one take so much care of a house? Just see my beloved has no settled time for food and drink. As he is a lecturer, he is going to duty to-day with his launch at 11 am while he would have it at 1:30 pm tomorrow. Who will be waiting for him? I have for my part told him to be routinebound from now on. I have further asked him to arrange the gas oven in this month by any means. Otherwise I cannot burn the stove. But he says that the scooter is to be had this month. He will take step for the gas oven from the next. I have however given him absolute warning.'

Shanta came in just at that moment with three glasses of lemon squash on a tray.' Please help yourselves,' said Banalata. Pratibha Dei and Chandrika Dei each took up a glass. In the meantime Banalata observed: 'I feel that there is no way out unless a freeze is bought soon after the air-cooler. Just see, some fruits were purchased to-day. With summer approaching, fruits will be rotting. Where shall we put them? So I have been urging him to get a freeze.

Pratibha Dei and Chandrika Dei, putting the glasses on the table, confirmed her: 'Sure, how can one manage without it?'

Chandrika Dei, no doubt, thought within herself, 'My own mate is just a lecturer. Can he afford to buy all those things? I wonder why my father got me married to a humble lecturer.' She, however, kept the feeling of her mind to herself and said, 'I too think of asking him for a freeze. How can one get along without it?'

Pratibha Dei followed, "Can anybody dispense with the freeze? But I am probably not going to pester him in the current month. He was perhaps speaking of getting a steel almirah in the present. On its arrival home, I shall raise the issue of freeze."

Pratibha Dei was, of course, considering in her mind how her husband, being only a Deputy Collector, could afford so many things. With some extra income, it could possibly have been helped. "It is not understandable how my father married me to an ordinary Deputy Collector though he is a reputed doctor. But one has to put up a strange show to get along in the society". 'What makes you think so deeply?' asked Chandrika Dei finding Pratibha Dei in her worrying mood.

'Nothing of the sort. I was just thinking that it is time for him to return after-noon being over. No, I must ask him for the freeze to-day. My Sonny too would be returning from school. Let us now get back home. What do you say, Chandrika Dei? The ayah is there at home, of course.' Pratibha Dei explained.

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'Yes, we have to return', assented Chandrika Dei adding;' If our respectable Lecturer has just come back, he must have been fretting and fuming. But who cares for such resentment?" And Chandrika Dei was deciding within herself that she would talk to him about the freeze without fail. Fuel and kerosene too for the stove were however wanting at home to-day. That issue was to be raised first.

'Well, let us go now.' Pratibha Dei reminded.

Banalata said, "Are you going? Thank you both. The afternoon was, however, very lively. Where shall we have the entertainment tomorrow- is it at Pratibha Dei's house or at Chandrika Dei's?" Both of them answered, 'First do please drop in tomorrow.'

While Pratibha Dei and Chandrika Dei were departing, Banalata had been thinking of the milk-man who came there every morning and asked for payment of arrear dues for two months. Payment of previous month's salary had not been received till then.

Seeing off her two neighbours, Banalata said, 'So, bye-bye.' The time was then approaching for the return of Chinmaya Babu, the Munsif, Raghunath Babu, the Deputy Collector, and the Lecturer, Sarat Babu. Their housewives Banalata, Pratibha and Chandrika were feeling here anxious. Pestering them at the bottom of the mind were their vanity and grievances. They were worried that the balloon, filled with more air than necessary, bursts. They were most likely aware of it. Still... ■

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HISTORY OF A DIARY

Mohapatra Nilamani Sahu

'Maybe life has ultimately no meaning...
Life is neither happiness nor unhappiness.
Nor does it lie in vice or virtue.'

■

EVERYTHING, to be sure, is hoax and meaningless here- everything unfair and sham. All things are imperfect, immature, twisted and consequently bitter and disagreeable here. This world is another vast desert. Whoever is farming here is an idiot. Those who have the idea that something or other can be achieved through this life are building castles in the air or dead drunk. The essential thing is- lying on death-bed one could here look upwards and loudly announce before dying that this world and life are mercilessly meaningless. There is terrible suffering here from birth to death. All relationship is aimed at self-centred happiness. In this dreary desert life, everyone is striving to gain happiness and pleasure at the cost of others, but the consequence is only exploitation. Fulfilment of desire is not to be had here. Everybody's throat and roof of mouth get parched with terrific thirst. The sooner this life flickers out, the better.

Bidyadhar Babu was recording only this much in his diary. Since long he had been thinking that he would make the last observation of life, i.e. write it down in the diary. He had been keeping a diary from his boyhood, at least from his college days. Events of his life as had some impact on his mind and regulated his living in one way or other had been recorded: Legion is the number of such incidents that occurred in his life.

Bidyadhar Babu was about sixty years of age. He picked up the diary to-day for recording the sum-total of his view of life before his exit from the world. X X X He was eager to give the last comment on life. But there was profuse perspiration with the description of the meaninglessness of life in just a few lines. His whole body was drenched in sweat. Jotting down a few sentences, he trembled as though he had committed a sin X X X He felt very uneasy putting on record the last evaluation of the world and life. He had the idea that he would probably feel relieved after noting it down. But the reverse happened. It seemed as though someone, knocking him down, censured: 'Idiot! Have you understood this world for making a final estimate of its value and that of life? Among crores of humans and living beings that were in existence and are currently living, you are one. Nobody has ordered or requested you to estimate the value of life. Don't think that anybody will ever attach importance to your evaluation. You are yourself a selfish and cruel man.'

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With this mental shock, Bidyadhar Babu picked out, for reasons unknown, Diary No. 3 from amongst the previous diaries in his suitcase. Then he started opening it under the lamp. As soon as his eyes accidentally fell on a page of that diary, he went on reading:

'Dt.21.9.55, Place-Cuttack, Time-2:00 am:- X X X I took for Santwana some 'ravdi' (milk-stuff) from Dhira Sahu's shop. Santwana was probably not that crazy for 'ravdi'. I arrived and found Santwana sitting on the terrace surrounded by her vulgar flatterers frolicking with her. I was irritated to see this scene. I hate these self-centred, sensual sycophants of Santwana. They are involved in various atrocious activities in the society. They are earning plenty of black money in ways of their own. X X X That man, sitting close to Santwana and smoking a cheroot, incessantly being very much tipsy, is Sunil Chowdhury- a master-dacoit and murderer at that. X X X The underhand methods adopted for earning a lot of money put much strain on his nerves. He drinks heavily and indulges in womanising to be relieved from that strain. He has of late directed his attention to Santwana for the past few days. I have repeatedly warned Santwana. She has countless flatterers. How many are her lovers? Santwana would not heed though she heard it. Laughing it away, she remarked: 'Bidyadhar Babu! Though it is true that you are a good poet, you are very jealous. X X X Let nobody stand in the other's way'.

X X X X

Then she lifted my hand and seated me on the chair to her right. 'You must have come with an entirely fresh poem for me, Bidyadhar Babu!' She enquired.

With a sense of achievement I replied: "All the best poems of the world have been waiting for your approval, Santwana!"

X X X X

Santwana hosted them all with the 'ravdi' presented by me and shared it herself too with pleasure. Then throwing her hypnotising look all over me, she observed: 'This world cannot produce anything softer and sweeter than 'ravdi'. But, Bidyadhar Babu, all the 'ravdi' of this world is bitter and distasteful, compared with the sweetness of your humorous poems. Let the poems be recited now.'

Hearing Santwana's remarks, her Satanic flatterers burst out laughing, that is, laughing in contempt. Then they left. I read out three poems. Santwana gave me three kisses. With this I remain to-day...'.

Reading the above, Bidyadhar Babu put back the diary and lay on bed for a few moments with face downwards. Then his whole being was suddenly possessed by a feeling of terrific pity. He embraced the pillow and wept bitterly. The event of that most pathetic and wretched day flashed back in his mind. He had spent many pleasant evenings and nights filled with songs and love spread over some five years. It was on account of Santwana that this world was perfectly meaningful and life saturated with consolation. But-

Following an interval of just five years occurred a horrible accident. On

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receipt of information, Bidyadhar Babu rushed to Santwana's house breathlessly like others on that day. The dead body of Santwana was hanging from the ceiling fan of her bed-room with the tongue stretched out and both hands tied on the back. The house was overcrowded. Two police officers were investigating if it was a suicide case.

X X X X

The eyes of Bidyadhar Babu fell on a cistern in the courtyard. That miscreant, that Satan, drunkard Sunil Chowdhury was sitting there with both legs stretched and puffing smoke from a cheroot at will. He seemed to have drunk heavily since morning. A strange fit of temper suddenly seized the head of Bidyadhar Babu. Being wild with rage, he seemed to have lost his intelligence. He thought: "X X X This depraved drunkard Sunil Chowdhury, master of black money, is responsible for Santwana's suicide. I shall finish him to-day.'

In fact, he gripped the neck of Sunil with both his hands and trembled. But something unexpected happened. Sunil suddenly rose up and, clasping Bidyadhar Babu, burst out weeping profusely. With tears he exclaimed,' O Bidyadhar! Bidyadhar! The world is bereaved of Santwana from today. Nobody can survive here any more. X X X you are the king among us, brother! Can you bring Santwana back? I shall offer you a reward of five lakh rupees. Can you, Bidyadhar?"

Bidyadhar Babu embraced Sunil and sobbed like a child. 'Sunil! Excuse me, Sunil! Santwana will never come back. She beduped us and passed away. We both are helpless and bereaved of Santwana from to-day...'

No, one cannot offer any remark on this world. No final comment can be made. Maybe, life has ultimately no meaning. The implication of life is only living with knowledge and understanding that one is alive. Life is neither happiness nor unhappiness. Nor does it lie in vice or virtue. Life only connotes life. It is neither for foe nor for friend, but for self absolutely... Bidyadhar Babu has not written his diary since then. No longer has the diary any particular value. Life is, however, no lie, no sham. With acceptance of life one gives highest value to it. But this point cannot be recorded in the diary. ■

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DARKNESS

Sundari Uttam Chandrani

'He felt as though Janaki had set fire to his body and he was in flames.. The shape of an image melting like wax in burning fire was hanging before him.'

■

THE setting sun was offering red greeting to Sadhuram, but he was not in a position to return it. Happily for him, the sun sank down too. If others would come to know of his distress, there might be trouble. Why should anybody else come between a man and his wife?

Residents of the barrack happened to pass through the same route as usual on previous days. But they did not have the courage to ask him why he kept on sitting there. Everyone was busy with his own affairs.

Deepu suddenly came out of the house shouting, 'Daddy! Mother has poured out a canful of kerosene oil on her head.'

"Isn't she getting matches?' said Sadhuram lighting the biri.

Janaki too rushed out and immediately gave two heavy blows on Sadhuram's back with the retort 'I have already been burning as such.'

The inmates and children of the other barrack started crowding round there. Janaki beat up the children too. 'Keep away from me. You are burning me up with fire of your daily torture anyway. To-day I shall really burn myself to death. Where's the match? Come here, you mischievous chap! Give me the match.' She burst out.

Deepu ran away and threw the match-box in the drain. Janaki followed and caught hold of him. She started giving him a good thrashing. Deepu thought it wise to tear up the shirt to escape beating.

Janaki entered the house and beat her breast. She dashed her head against the wall and lamented aloud, 'Life, alas, has not gone out of me! I wonder how I was trapped into the coil of this cobra. Oh! I am now an alienated creature. I belong neither to my parents nor to the husband. You have made a hell of my life, O Ravan!'

'Hullo Janaki! You can see the position of all these people. Everybody minds his own business. Bear with everything. Otherwise it will be hard even to survive in these days of rising prices.' The neighbours advised her out of sympathy.

The entire noisy scene gradually came to a close. Sadhuram sat silently on the cot as he used to previously. X X X After a long interval he turned his face and looked into the house wiping his eyes. The children were asleep on the

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mat. Janaki lay huddled up like a luggage near the wall.

One could hear the whistling of the train at a distance. Sadhuram's body started to shiver. He rubbed his eyes and looked around. Lights were off in all the houses. He did not feel like going in. The house still sent back the echo of the evening brawl: -

'Only dal, chappati and green leaves to be taken daily.'

'Is it then meat I should keep ready for you?'

'There should be nice chappati at least. Is there any famine of good wheat for us?'

'Unless you give me money, how can I buy and stock wheat of good quality?'

'You are repeatedly pressing for money on every occasion. I pass on the entire amount of my pay to you. Shall I cut off my heart and place it before you?'

'Why cut out the heart and offer to me? It is I who am your debtor and hence must feed you even though you remain idle.'

'What the hell have you given me? With what assets have you come here from your parents' home?'

'Not a grain of rice do you supply to your children. All the rice is sold out in the black market. It is only then that we luckily get this reddish wheat. Eat up whatever you get.'

'Does it agree with the stomach?'

'Hopeless fellow! I am unable to feed only one mouth of yours. Children have a hundred mouths. Don't they need clothing? Besides there is the Ramayan of books and paper everyday.'

'Take away all this- the three chappatis too and put them in the children's mouths. Devil! Have you ever offered two fine chappatis at my meal?'

'Don't show such fit of temper to me. You don't give me lakhs of rupees so that I will stand all this. I know how I manage the household. ...Yes, go on beating with that other shoe too. Finish me off. I am also to dispose of all the issues to-day. Beat me as much as you can. Monster! Strangle me. I shall be free from this everyday nuisance.'

'I will really kill you by throttling, mind you. Restrain your tongue. Stupid! You have lost your head.'

'How can one keep one's head here? If someone needs a book, another wants a pen. When one asks for slippers, the other would insist on an eight-anna-worth chain. The youngest one, topping them all, asks for this or that throughout the day.'

'Nonsense! Why can't you make any reply to them?'

'That I have been doing. What a pity that God did not load my breast with a stone rather than the heart of a mother! How long shall I, with this sort of

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fretting day and night, torment myself and the children as well? It is not for my self-interest that I do anything. I beg from others the clothes I wear. And what you need is sweetmeat...'

'Bunkum! Do I ever ask you for money? I come back home toiling like a bullock for the whole day. And you can't offer me even two chappatis that can pass down the throat. What is more, you answer me back.'

'Wherefrom shall I fetch? What terrific price-hike! There is the flaming spurt of price for dal, pulse or anything you lay your hand on. What am I to do? I could have also worked somewhere had there been no begetting of children like a pack of puppies.'

'Throw away these worthless chaps in some temple or monastery. The little devils! The callous mill-owners are short of funds to raise our pay. They are on the other hand busy building temples and abbeys. The rascals don't care for living human beings like us. And they grow in bulk offering 'bhoga' (oblation) to the god of stone.'

'Shree Ram... Why blaspheme God? Goddess Laxmi has already deserted you. You are now going to lose Laxman too...'

'Am I condemning him?'

'Yes, you are anti-God.'

'So I am opposed to God... all right!'

'Just wait. ...Oh, beating me up! Why assault me? What for do you clash with me? Go and fight with them.'

A fierce fight ensued. The neighbours crowded round there. Someone forcibly dragged Sadhuram by the hand and put him on the cot. He felt as though Janaki had set fire to his body and he was in flames.

A scene flashed before the eyes of Sadhuram. The shape of an image melting like wax in burning fire was hanging before him. This image struggling with death was shouting with extended hands. It went around and burnt down the neighbouring houses like gun-powder. The image surrounded by flames became restless followed by eternal silence. One felt suffocated with the foul smell of fresh flesh roasted in fire.

It seemed to Sadhuram as if he was really choked. He rubbed his eyes and looked around X X X His chest appeared to burst. He wiped his eyes silently with the shirt. Then he rose and entered the house.

It was the house of a poor man without any palanquin or bed. The children were sleeping on mats spread here and there on the floor. Wearing the kerosene-soaked saree Janaki was asleep in a corner huddled up like a bundle against the wall.

Sadhuram slowly moved towards Janaki and sat beside her. An electric current seemed to pass through her body. She sprang up like a toy machine... ■

[Original Sindhi story translated into Oriya entitled 'TAMASA'
By Rajeswari Purohit]

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HISTORY

Jadunath Das Mohapatra

'Let new History be made in Orissa. May valuable grist to the mill be within reach not only of Shibshankar, but also of many historians like him! Wish Orissa a picture on the map of India shining like gold.'

■

It was Shibshakar, the Historian.

He sat in his drawing room absorbed in thought. The tea-cup on the table in front puffed curls of smoke. He was looking out of the window putting the half-burnt cigarette on the ash-tray. On the other side of the window lay the vast bed of the Mahanadi, half of it under water and the other half with sand, as the bright moon-light clearly identified. The mid-river island with dense growth of trees cast a shadow darkening a part of the river-bed. On the bank stood the too old, dilapidated temple. The apex of the temple had toppled down and offer of worship to Shib had lately been stopped there. It was a deserted temple of God. Very likely drunkards and scoundrels were recently committing there casual crimes after sun-set. Three to four steamers and five or six boats had anchored near the river-bank. Cooking of food inside the boat was in progress. Some fish freshly caught from the river were writhing, waiting probably for the last hour.

Shibshankar emptied the tea-cup. The tea had meanwhile turned cold. Picking up the smouldering cigarette, he finished two puffs at it.

Thoughts centring on numberless events were passing through his mind. His head was getting wet with sweat generated by the heat of thoughts. A little bit of fanning was needed.

'Madhua! Madhua!' He called out the servant. At the call of the Sahib, the servant Madhua entered without any delay.

'It is so hot. Switch on the fan.'

Madhua was probably taken aback, but he was aware of the Sahib's eccentricity. Who would turn the fan on in a December night?

Madhua switched on the fan. Shibshankar felt hot in spite of such cold. His wife Preeti Devi was reading a chapter of the Ramayan in the adjacent room. Shibshankar again called out, 'Preeti!' Preeti Devi came along and stood behind her husband's chair. Placing her hand on his head, she asked, 'What's the matter?'

'It is extremely hot', replied Shibshankar.

'Hot?' Preeti Devi was startled. 'But it is so severely cold everywhere-inside and outside.'

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Shibshankar's head was sweating even though it was so cold.

'You are buried in thoughts, is it not?'

'Yes.'

'Is it at all paying?'

'The historian conducts researches into history not with consideration of any profit or loss. His mission is to bring to light the hidden truth. The heritage of a great race remained in the dark. Its glory passed into oblivion and thereafter no more history has been made.' Shibshankar defended himself.

Preeti Devi could not follow anything in particular. Her husband's research was meaningless to her. In what way was it profitable then? Shibshankar, however, contended, 'It will fetch a heavy return. My research will serve as a brilliant beacon-light for the future of this race. With truth coming to light, this race would no more commit blunder in future. A new Barabati or Konark of art could be built again, The sons of the Oriya soil will again voyage to Islands of Bali, Borneo, Java and Sumatra. A mighty race will spring up... at once cultured... and prosperous.'

These view-points nevertheless were not to the liking of Preeti Devi.

Though fifteen years elapsed, no child was born to grace the home of Shibshankar and Preeti Devi. The house was empty. The daily chore of Shibshankar was to go to college at 8 o' clock in the morning and return at 7pm. It was not possible to come even for lunch. The small boy fetched to the college his lunch in a tiffin-carrier. The long duration of the day caused intense pain to her. Various worries developed in her mind. Occasionally she used to heave sigh of sadness.

Shibshankar was, of late, too much worried. He had to put on record the chapter of his research. He asked, 'Preeti! What brought the glorious Oriya race to this sorry state of affairs? Say who is responsible for it. To relieve temporarily her husband's strain of thought Preeti Devi advised, 'Come along. Have your meal and go to bed. Think it over tomorrow. You will go mad if you persist in thinking like this.'

Reminiscing followed reminiscing endlessly. In the cobweb of retrospection the hazy past projected from the sands of Konark the face of Narasingh Dev, the Emperor of Utkal and those of Shibei Santara, Bisu Maharana, Dharmapada and others. On the sea-beach of Puri flashed the apex of devotion of Indradyumna, Vidyapati, etc to Jagannath... Again came to view the sacrifice of blood by Buxi Jagabandhu for retaining the freedom of the Oriya race.

It seems as though this occurred yesterday. The nine-storied building of the Barabati Fort stood on the Mahanadi bank. But what was the treatment the malicious and jealous English people gave to it? They pulled down the proud, lofty fort and scattered its broken stones on the highway of Cuttack. Crushing the same with a steam-roller, they gave a rude shock to the chest of the Oriya race.

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There was musing, non-stop musing. Years rolled by. Ambition for freedom arose again in India under alien rule. Non-co-operation with the Britishers followed. Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Motilal, Deshbandhu Chittaranjan, Balagangadhar Tilak, Jawaharlal Nehru, Netaji Subhas Chandra and a host of others raised their voice. There was trumpet-call for freedom struggle from every village to the city... India became independent. Historic August 15 made undying history in the front space of the time... National reconstruction followed independence.

Rumination added to never-ending rumination. In the post-independence period Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Rajendra Prasad, Maulana Azad, among many others, laid a strong foundation for India. The constitution was framed. Plans got underway for the all-round uplift of a democratic, secular state. Execution of work started for strengthening the economy. The states went ahead. There has been much advancement in the fields of education, culture, agriculture, industry, etc. The shape of India started beaming with a new look. But how is it that Orissa could not make corresponding progress keeping pace with this change?

The contribution of Orissa to the freedom struggle of India was by no means mean. But what has happened after independence? With an attack of terrific head-ache, he began to utter a sharp cry. Preeti Devi stroke his head with her soft hand and urged him, 'Let it drop now. Don't burn yourself out with further thought to-day. You need rest.'

Shibshankar's eyes were going to close. Preeti Devi raised and put him on his feet, as though by force.

"Come along. It is getting late for the dinner..." she persuaded.

Shibshankar proceeded to the dining table without further protest.

Thinking and thinking ad infinitum.

Reflection on history... going over the past... Thinking of the future.

Let new history be made in Orissa. May valuable grist to the mill be within reach not only of Shibshankar, but also of many historians like him! Wish Orissa a picture on the map of India shining like gold.■

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THE NEIGHBOUR'S DOG

Krushna Prasad Misra

'Though you have got to live as a neighbour, you won't visit anybody in moments of crisis. Say whatever you like, this is a great drawback with you.'

■

REBATI had by then told it thrice. Though she narrated the incident of theft from the neighbour's house with greater exaggeration on each occasion compared with the earlier one, Natabar felt as though it was new every time. So he used to hear the report of the occurrence of theft with interest from beginning to end. First he heard it at the time of going to bed. He listened to it for the second time at breakfast in the morning and for the third time while taking evening tea.

-'So the police dog did not go elsewhere and came rushing towards Mrs. Mohanty? And Mrs. Mohanty fell down unconscious looking at his vastly horrible shape?'

- 'Why! Is the dog at fault? He is not guided by intelligence. He is to track the thief by means of smell. He was given the thief's clothing for smell. Discerning identical smell in the dress of Mrs. Mohanty, he rushed towards her.'

- 'But one wonders how it is possible.'

- 'Following the reported theft case, one whole day passed before the police dog arrived. The lady, holding the thief's pugree in her hand, must have previously shown it to the children and women of the entire locality. So wasn't its smell transmitted to her dress as a result?'

- 'Yes, that is likely. But what about Bali Babu?'

- 'Why not you just make a call at his residence? Though you have got to live as a neighbour, you won't visit anybody in moments of crisis. Say whatever you like, this is a great drawback with you.'

Natabar directed his look at Rebati. It appeared to him that Rebati's talk had somewhere a tinge of mockery. He gravely observed, 'Do you recall what comment was made by Bali Babu when I first kept the dog as pet? He remarked: 'Was there nothing else for you except a dog to be kept as a pet at last? However it appears to be of a good country breed. Why did not you fetch one from near the canteen? That old brown bitch had given birth to a number of puppies.'

'No, the dog is a hybrid of country and Alsatian species. I fetched him from Vikanlal, the Advocate of Cuttack', I replied.'

Feeling as though it was incredible, Balabhadra Mohanty laughed and

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went away. His mocking laugh did not end with his queries on that day. Whenever Natabar took the dog with him for a walk or for his urination, passing of stool or his bath with soap, Balabhadra Babu would stir from wherever he might be and put in his appearance on the verandah. And he would query- 'Are you bathing the dog? Will he take food without bath? Is he going out for walk on specific days? He has become bulky. Do you daily feed him meat? You used to give him eggs at intervals. Let him go out on long walk. This much of excercise is not sufficient for a dog.'

It was known to Natabar Babu that Balabhadra Babu supplied eggs to both of his children twice a month dividing one egg between the two on each occasion. They did not go in for milk. Nobody in his family liked taking meat. They were fond of small fish. This was the homily he listened to from that Balabhadra Babu.

Though in the beginning Natabar used to answer all his queries appropriately, later on his veiled taunt very much hurt him. When Balabhadra was found on the verandah or the road, he was no more inclined to take the dog for a walk. The responsibility of taking out the dog for a walk was delegated to the servant. He was terribly angry with Balabhadra. Just when the dog passed urine or stool on the verandah and there was breaking point for the nose with the foul smell, Balabhadra would remember Natabar. Crossing the barbed wire-fencing, he reached the out-house verandah of Natabar. He would then call out in a soft, friendly voice: 'What are you doing, Natabar Babu? What engagement keeps you sitting all the time at home? Come out for a while'. Natabar would be out at that moment with the terrific feeling that the dog was not needed. It seemed as if the rich Marwari took him for a fool and duped him with the offer of a stray dog describing him as an Alsatian one. Consequently the dog could not learn anything despite all the training given to him. He used to urinate, pass stool and vomit on the verandah. He (Natabar) called out the servant loudly and asked him to clean the verandah with phenyl. He further directed him to keep the dog chained on the other side of the house.

Once he had, with shrinking, suggested to Balabhadra Babu to keep a dog. Balabhadra turned down the proposal with a laugh and replied, 'No, brother! I am not in favour of dog. If I am to keep anything, it is a cow so that I would get some milk.'

Hearing him out, Natabar would keep quiet. There has been occurrence of theft in the house of that Balabhadra to-day.' 'What are the things stolen?' he enquired.

Better ask about the things left unstolen. The thieves have decamped with everything except the clothes they had put on.'

'It is a matter of great regret indeed.'

'Just for that reason do I ask you to make a call. Everyone is visiting their house to communicate their thoughts and feelings.'

'See the matter has taken as awkward turn. I neglected to call on the first

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day. It seems odd to visit now. If I call on him after a gap of two days, he may think that my visit is not intentional, but I just follow the cue of others.'

'You better proceed, whatever may be his feeling. Giving some reason or other you explain to him why you could not turn up on the first day. He will understand. Man craves for sympathy from neighbours at a time like this.'

Placing the tea-cup on the table, Natabar consented: 'All right, so I shall start. He will have his walk and my duty too will be done.'

Natabar then unchained the exceedingly emaciated country dog who had no walk nor any bath for a good many days. Some of his furs started to fall off. With the chain in his hand he walked along the road. It was his intention to move to and fro on the way and then pose to arrive accidentally at his neighbour's residence for communication of thoughts and feelings.■

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THE EYE

Narayan Pruseth

'The photo Sunil saw at my house turned his face pale. It was that of his old father Sadanand's- a picture of despair on death with mouth open and eyes closed. And in them remained unheard the terrific, piteous cry of a departed soul. But shining white, some divine aura in a circle, lighted up his whole face.'

■

I used to see that old man very often on the verandah of the Blood Bank of Medical College, at least once a week. He was, to be sure, younger than I thought. But it was obvious that he had rapidly aged with mental stress.

The old man had presumably donated blood on that day. The way he sat on the wooden bench of the Blood Bank presaged his imminent death. He was inclined to one side. I slightly stirred the old man on the bench without proceeding further to the Blood Bank. He slowly opened his eyes and gazed at my face. His eyes looked deep red like those of a man heavily drunk. A repeatedly stitched shirt in tatters was soaked with sweat. I made him properly seated and asked: "How do you feel ?"

"O, feeling better. I will gradually be all right --" muttered the old man haltingly.

"Sit on for a while. You may be reeling."

The old man stood up with much difficulty and explained: "It was due to protracted sitting. There's no trouble at all. What a lot of work still pending.. interest.. loan due to be paid.."

The old man had probably left the place giving me his compliments with folded hands and neither waited for my response nor left behind any information.

I saw him in front of my house with a bundle of newspapers just after a few days. "Babu, have you got old newspapers for sale?" he asked haltingly. Diverting my look to his face, I just inquired without further reference to paper, "What do you take these papers for , Old Chap?"

"Nothing very particular, my dear! I just make paper bag, 'TUNGA' and earn a few chips by selling in the market."

"Since when have you started this business? Almost every week I happen to see you at the Blood Bank..."

"It was started very recently. See, I have returned from the Blood Bank this morning, Babu!" said he.

"Well, what will happen to you, if you donate blood like this in this advanced age?"

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"I shall die if I don't," replied he with a smile, rather dry and continued, "I have to pay back the loan and interest too every week. The creditor wants not blood, but claims interest."

I was at my wit's end. "I am to call at several places, Babu. If you have old papers for sale, please deliver the same." He entreated.

"You have taken credit.. Interest is due.. That altogether baffles my comprehension. And what is the amount of loan you can repay with the money fetched by donating blood?" I further enquired.

"I mortgaged the house with the hope of building up the future of my son. That was all lost. Entire amount of loan taken verbally from others is to be repaid. The only payment I make to the money-lenders is weekly interest. What is more, a case filed for a plot of land has been pending for the last four years. " The old man thus explained his position in detail.

"The case is still undecided. You have lost everything. Why pursue it anymore?" I went on interrogating him with interest.

Wiping out with soiled shirt the sweat dropping from his wrinkled face, the old man confessed: "It is, to be frank, only hope. If the plot is decreed in my favour, that alone is to be sold. Man dies in hope and I share the same fate."

"So the case is not finalised?"

"The case still remains undecided for me. There is only extension of time one after another. It was posted for hearing today and again postponed to another date. Next time it is presumably going to be finalised." The old man expressed the hope.

The voice of his fit of pigue had excited pity in me. "Where do you come from, grand old man?" I asked with avid interest.

The moment he uttered the name of his native village, I was struck dumb being taken aback. Then he left my house at once despite my repeated request to him to halt.

(II)

Though I used to enquire of him at intervals, no more information was available. My heart was heavy with grief being haunted by some sort of a sense of guilt . Maybe, the old man might have been donating his blood in my absence and repaying the loan. The cataract of my ignorance regarding the true self of the old man was removed when I heard the name of his native village. Sadanand was the teacher of a Panchayat Primary School of that village when my father had been posted there as B. D. O. His son, who was a brilliant scholar, was my classmate. He had been a widower long since. As the old man wanted his son to go in for the medical course, he got him admitted into I. Sc. class. But there is a wide gap between dream and reality, expectation and achievement. Sadanand was always worried for financing him. Meanwhile I had not come across him as my father had been transferred.

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He had lost everything when I next saw him.

Since he left off teachership on some grounds, he had to court a lot of hardships for the medical education of his son. He kept himself busy with work from dawn to dusk for this. In the morning he got a job as clerk of a rice mill. But his counting of rice-bags was repeatedly found mistaken. He was sacked as he identified the rice bags and sand bags separately during a check-up of the supply Deptt. His son sunil was then a House Surgeon. Sadanand managed for one year by mortgaging his land.

Sunil used to visit his father during all holidays. Of late, he looked very grave. After halt for a day or two with his father, he would come back. Sadanand discovered a terrific change coming over his son who kept it as a closely guarded secret. Spring with its glamour reigns over the Medical College the year round. Sunil might have fallen in love with some class-mate or nurse, he feared.

Sunil was changed, of course. But nothing of the sort as apprehended had happened. The issue of service was once under discussion. "Where is the prospect of service in the country, Daddy? Who is there for backing us? Do you think a private clinic can be conveniently run?" Sunil dealt with all aspects of the issue. Sadanand kept quiet. "So what are you going to do?" he asked.

"I have got a seat in a Medical College of U.S.A." Sunil disclosed.

Sadanand could follow nothing. "U.S.A.! That's an English country. How much money is needed?"

"Not much, Daddy. Only ten thousand just towards passage money and initial expenses to be adjusted."

"... So much money and I..." Sadanand stammered.

"Put this house on mortgage. I shall redeem it on return..."

Sadanand was in a fix... a needy father seeing the dream of making a great man of his son whereas that dream-flower had petals smelling of pain of helplessness. And with the smell of that bitter odour he became suffocated.

However on the following day pledging his only house and with the verbal credit he got seven thousand rupees and passed on to Sunil. But he found signs of unhappiness writ large on his son's face with the amount being less.

Sadanand got only two letters from sunil after he left for U.S.A. Even after the passage of three years nothing was heard of him. The mortgaged house was subsequently lost. Sadanand shifted to the town helplessly with a view to repaying the loan verbally taken from others.

He paid the interest by the earning made with donation of blood, sale of 'tunga' or doing some work or other casually. He also used to pay fee to the pleader hoping that a decree might be obtained in the suit previously filed for a plot of one acre of land.

But date of hearing of the case was never final. It was extension ad infinitum.

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One day I happened to meet him again before the Blood Bank and first offered him my greetings. Putting some money in his hand against his will, I dragged him out of the Bank forcibly. He did not honour my entreaties at all. But he handed to me on that day a paper which he had signed at my residence. He had donated his body to the Medical College for the cause of the public on his death.

Then the old man was suddenly out of sight for a few days. In his absence the place where he had been seated caused me severe heart-ache brought on by a sense of vacuum, the surrounding being surcharged, as though in a summer, with a sense of something missing.

(III)

I learnt from the letter of Sunil that he had returned to India. But my attempt to put the broken home in order with intimation to the a old man did not succeed. He was not heard of for a long spell. A lengthy telegram sent by Sunil's wife reached soon after his own- quite beyond expectation. It was heart-rending, though unbelievable. "The car by which we moved from Rourkela met with an accident with the tearing of the tyre to pieces. Though Sunil survived, both his eyes have been damaged with face being rudely dashed. He may be blind for life, if he is not immediately operated upon. Unless the eyes are removed, his very survival is at stake." The telegram read.

With the rude shock, I felt as though life had gone out of me. Time, while retaliating, acts with a vengeance.

An unconscious impulse made me eager to transmit this news to the old man. I rushed to the Blood Bank with all seriousness, but found him not" Thank God, the old man has not come again to donate blood!" said I. Somehow the court matter sprang to mind and I thought that it was likely to be the date of hearing of the case.

I entered the court premises and found that there was a crowd under the "Peepul" tree. Forcing myself through the crowd I saw the self-same Sadanand prostrated on the ground-something one could hardly believe. From the broken head had oozed some blood and through the mouth too had come a little of it. The old man was dead by the time the check-up was done with feeling of pulse-beat.

There was a pleader's clerk standing by. "What's the matter?" I asked him in a suffocated voice.

"Babu, this old man had been coming to court for the last four years in connection with a suit filed for a piece of one acre of land. The hapless fellow put in his appearance several times. It was the final date for hearing to-day with cross-examination. But extension was again allowed as the opposite party did not appear. The old man, on hearing of extension, collapsed while walking down the court verandah and died." The pleader's clerk narrated to me revealing the 'how and why' of the incident.

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No tears, if I remember aright, dropped down from my eyes. But what tortured me was that I could not tell a father of vision the saga of the son who had blindly lost his vision!!

With a deep sob I loaded the dead body in my car. On that day itself I had to make arrangement for the eye-operation of Sunil. The operation was successful bringing to my mind tortured with depression just one drop of untained joy. When the bandage over Sunil's eyes was removed after a week, he could not see anything with the flood of light. As he gradually started identifying people, I remained standing before him looking at his new eyes with power of vision. I felt as though those eyes were filled to the brim with anguish of aeons of neglect. I burst out laughing bereft of pity- highly adoring the donor.

While expressing his gratitude to me, Sunil admiringly observed: "I could see the world again through you. But to the donor of the new eyes transplanted on my face, I offer salutations galore..."

"No, I ask you not to," said I. "He is no god. Better honour his credo. Nobody ever gains in stature by raising his living standard with higher studies, by nicely dressing up or by living in a foreign country. Treat another man as a human being like yourself and then only you turn unto a great man worth the name."

Sunil, like a stupid fellow, kept on gazing at my face.

That very day I was committed to show him the photo of the man who had donated the eyes. I again threw a look at the bench of the Blood Bank while coming from the hospital to my house. It lay empty.

The Photo Sunil saw at my house turned his face pale. It was that of his old father Sadanand's- a picture of despair on death with mouth open and eyes closed. And in them remained unheard the terrific, piteous cry of a departed soul. But shining white, some divine aura, in a circle, lighted up his whole face.

Sunil looked at it again and realised that he had no vision turning a blind eye to Sadanand while he was alive. But blessed with vision he found that Sadanand had already closed his eyes.

Sunil, gripped by unconscious fear of having committed some heinous offence, went on weeping breathlessly. ■

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THE WONDER-WORKER HEAD ASSISTANT

Sarat Narayan Behera

'Parthapratim Babu is a
very nice man - But God is so
merciless that He has made such
a kind-hearted man a victim
of heart-attack'

■

It was right royal style. At his beck and call were thirty or forty people at the minimum. The scene can be guessed by one who has seen the travelling of Rajas and Maharajas of the princely states. Attendants were competing to give him service day and night.

There was a huge crowd at the hospital when I reached there the other day. Eight to ten vehicles were found with blowing horns and whirring sound. Around sixty or seventy persons were rushing to and fro. I presumed that a V.I.P., i.e. either a Minister or a top officer might be on visit or a major accident had occurred.

Once there is crowding following sudden occurrence of an incident or accident, it is difficult to discover the precise fact. Such was the position there. With protracted enquires I came to learn that Parthapratim Babu had come to hospital for a check-up. But who was Parthapratim Babu? Was he a king, a minister or a Governor to draw such a crowd with cars and coaches? Fortunately I happened to enquire from the Burrah Babu of the office of Parthapratim Babu, straight from the horse's mouth. He disclosed "Parthapratim Babu returned after attending a party and had a sound sleep on the previous night. But he woke up suddenly with trembling of chest and roused his wife. She thought that her husband was spluttering under the spell of drink. 'Your chest has been shocked with the flash of lightning. Don't worry. Lie down' she advised."

But Parthapratim Babu was capable of hunting tiger from the open jeep. He was not to be shocked by lightning or thunder. There was definitely some trouble. So the Burrah Babu was asked to come in the morning. Hearing the details, the Burrah Babu took sides with the Sahib and suggested that check-up in the hospital was advisable.

"But why is there so much crowding?" I asked looking at the Burrah Babu innocently. He laughed with superior airs taking it as a frivolous query. He explained: 'Don't you see? The people gathered here are officers of our area. When the public turn up to-morrow from that part, you can guess how difficult it is to find a man of such good heart like Parthapratim Babu in this "Kali Yuga."

With such words the Burrah Babu surprised me by giving an unnatural, noiseless laugh. I corrected myself and agreed "You are right, Burrah Babu.

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Indeed Parthpratim Babu has won the heart of many people. This crowd is its evidence."

The Burrah Babu suddenly gave an admiring laugh and said, "Let me take a round and enquire how things have been arranged. No work is done without personal supervision."

"Is Parthapratim Babu going to stay in the Guest House for treatment? I asked being astonished. "In the hospital", came the answer. Then the Burrah Babu whispered "If there were no Guest House, where could he take both lunch and other items? If he would want to relax a little, he could as well do so here." The Burrah Babu then left the Guest House hurriedly by a vehicle.

XXXX

Then Pathapratim Babu was under treatment for three to four days in the hospital where there was always bustling of crowd for him. Some people dropped in as visitors and others as attendants. So many turned up to look after smooth execution of each bit of work. There were visitors with flowers, fruits and what not. As there are various paths for the same destination, so the variety of visitors cherished the same fond desire of taking a close look at Parthpratim Babu. It was with that single object in view that people were streaming in from far-off places.

One could, however, guess from the conversation and dealings of the Burrah Babu that he was very faithful and close to the Sahib. As usual in the office, one had to get things done in the hospital too through him. The Burrah Babu took the visitors with him one by one for their call. Otherwise it would be a market-place if a number of people came along together. So literally honouring the strong direction of the doctor to give full rest to Parthapratim Babu, the Burrah Babu used to take with him only one person at a time for the call.

I became somewhat intimate with the Burrah Babu during Parthapratim's hospitalisation for three to four days. With the thinning of crowd in the evening, he shifted the Sahib to the Guest House and sat with me for chit-chat. He used to submit to the Sahib a list of officers who came from different offices to meet him during the day. One could know from that list that all officers down to the peons of different offices under his jurisdiction were coming there to call on him.

All that I heard from the Burrah Babu revealed clearly that he was thinking in terms of the interest of the Sahib day and night, awake or asleep. He talked only of Parthapratim Babu during his conversation for hours and never uttered a single word about himself or others.

The other day, while talking with him I divulged what I felt within: "Say whatever you like, you are a man of unique ability. But for you, Parthapratim Babu would not have got such medical treatment in this hospital. I think Parthapratim Babu is having more comfort in the hospital than at home."

The Burrah Babu gave a thankful laugh and replied: "There is nothing

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unique about me, Sir. There are people in this world one topping the other. Of course, I do as much as lies within my power. I have engaged four men each doing his duty for six hours. Four jeeps have always been kept standing. Just give a start and they move. There are four persons for catering- one each for breakfast, lunch, evening tea and dinner. Living here is costlier that at home. But I would not allow the Sahib to spend a single paisa. And with proper accounts there will be some surplus money on return home after meeting all expenses."

"Some money in surplus!" I became curious.

Throwing a careful look in all directions, the Burrah Babu remarked, "Why not? Please explain why no surplus will be left. Don't the people visiting Parthapratim Babu know how much money is required for expenditure here? Further how much does our Sahib need to feed only one mouth? So the fruits presented by visiting people are supplied to the fruit-shop. And you know at what rate fruit sells at present. If someone is on his way to the fruit-shop, it may be presumed that his pocket is full of black money or he has a patient at home. Hence fruit alone fetches us one hundred rupees or one hundred and a half - ha! ha!"

I had to bow down my head in recognition of Burrah Babu's commercial genius. I applauded: 'What a wonder-worker you are, Burrah Babu! Nobody on earth can do as much for your Sahib as you have been doing. I firmly believe that you will be suitably rewarded by Parthapratim Babu."

Burrah Babu used to read the 'Gita' every morning. So he believed in action with no hope for reward. In a very humble tone he passed the remark: "Sir, I do what I think is right. Parthapratim Babu is a very nice man. He has got a heart of gold. But God is so merciless that He has made such a kind-hearted man a victim of heart-attack." ■

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REVENGE

Banamali Panigrahi

'The fire of revenge had subsided. I was considerably satisfied. How displeased Gaji Bhai felt was known to him.'

■

THE aspiring teacher Biswaketan was proceeding along the crowded highway of the capital with a strong hope. He was lost in the vision of his project. With his transfer to the village, he would himself start farming during this year. It was not possible to manage with a cycle. A scooter had to be procured. 'I shall remember your help and sympathy, Biswa. When opportunity comes, I must try to repay your debt.' This assurance of the recently appointed Minister repeatedly rang in his ears.

Now that he was a Minister, he had a lot of reputation and influence in the official circles. He enjoyed much authority and power. Transfer of a teacher was a trifling matter. It could be done with a word over the phone. Biswaketan apprised the Minister of the mission of his visit. 'I shall look to it,' said the Minister and went away.

Even with the expiry of seven days, his object was not achieved. His money was exhausted except the balance for bus fare only. Biswa realised that the shocking experience gave him a good lesson. Stroking his head, he felt that it was better to go back home. 'I cannot wait further. Let me return'. Biswa intimated the Minister. Busy with work the Minister gave the laconic reply: 'All right.' With a downcast face Biswa was returning to the bus stand being disillusioned. 'Hello, Biswa! You are here.' His former colleague Birabar, coming from the opposite direction of the highway, suddenly shouted with excitement.

'Yes, brother! I came here with a bit of work.'

'Done?'

'No, but I am angry with myself. I rather repent that I had to stand here with bent legs with no result,' replied Biswa.

'That means...?'

'The thing is one probably becomes a different man after being a Minister, Bira. Leave it. It is better to forget. I am going back to the village.' Biswa was aggrieved.

'Why worry so much for a petty transfer? We have so many Ministers here. If this Minister does not oblige, let us approach our Gaji Bhai. Why do you lose heart like this? So many people get their work done through him. Gaji Bhai used to keep company with me for bat-killings. Will he not concede this small request of a companion? I strongly believe he will.' Bira spoke convincingly.

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Biswa could not decline. Both of them proceeded to Gaji Bhai's residence. The crowd at his residence was larger than that of a temple. The decoration was unique. Both the friends were thrilled with delight. 'Whatever it may me, our Gaji Bhai has demonstrated his ability.' The remark automatically dropped from Bira's lips.

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Swayed by self-confidence, Birabar rushed into the residence straight. He threw back the screen unhesitatingly. As he was crossing the door-step saying'. Gaji Bhai', there came the warning. 'Why do you come in? Wait there in the office. I am coming.'

The hurriedly advancing leg came back from the door-step of its own accord. His exultation was shattered in a moment. Enraged, he returned to Biswa with tears in his eyes and a bosom full of sobs. He spoke wildly like a mad man: 'I have lost him, Biswa. Gaji Bhai whom I treasured up like a pearl can no more be traced out in this ocean of grief.'

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It was clear to Biswa that the spirit of Gaji Bhai proper was not to be found in Gajendra Chandra Behera, the Minister. Bira got him seated in the bus. While talking to him from the other side of the shutters, wild Bira burst out, 'His misbehaviour will be duly retaliated, Biswa. Revenge will definitely be taken.' The bus advanced delinking both the friends.

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After an interval of two months, Bira wrote a letter saying, 'Biswa! With the passage of time Gaji Bhai suddenly dropped in at our door one afternoon like a fugitive. The Ministry had collapsed. Gajendra Behera, a candidate for the fresh election, was approaching the ordinary teacher Birabar Babu soliciting his help and co-operation. My strange memory hypnotised me. As I heard him call 'Bira Bhai' repeatedly, it seemed to me as if a living symbol of fraud and hoax was coming to befool me. It was not possible for me to control myself. Cataracts seemed to blur my vision. Gaji Bhai looked different in my eyes. That unforgettable event flashed back and made me restless with its onrush. My ears turned deaf. Without being mute, I asked haltingly, 'Who are you searching for? This is the house of Birabar Swain.'

I watched Gaji Bhai stretch his hand to my shoulder addressing me as Bira bhai. I drew back a little and enquired, 'Which Bira Bhai? 'I noted that Gaji Bhai was a little astonished and humiliated with my strange question. Then I freely bombarded him with fiery words. After my sharp, satirical attack I entered the house without waiting for a reply.

'Did I commit injustice or an offence?' I reflected and stirred out. Gaji Bhai was at his wit's end. Stunned and dumb-founded, he looked wretchedly at my name-plate hanging from the wall. The fire of revenge had subsided. I was considerably satisfied. How displeased Gaji Bhai felt was known to him. I remain,

your companion
Bira Bhai ■

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ACCIDENT

Pradipta Dash

'He remained sitting with closed eyes with a view to saving his beloved Mausumi from the various accidents threatening her.'

■

He used to walk with a sort of dragging of his immobile legs. On his body with wrinkled skin stood his bald head. He was depressed with suffering caused by terrific burning sensation in the head. That the old man was very wretched could be guessed from the tense, blue arteries on both sides of his forehead. He was smarting under trouble every moment and burning himself away like coal charred in the bowels of the rail engine. He recovered the normal state. The goods train on the platform with its back to the sky was steaming off.

He threw his look at the gate of the small railway station. Cars from opposite directions crossed each other swiftly on the overbridge. The train might pass under the overbridge any moment. He looked disturbed at times. Turning back, he was startled to see the face of a gentleman who stood before him with his hands thrust into the trouser pockets. The half-grey hair, thin face and the casual half smile appearing on his betel-stained lips showed clearly that he was not on the wrong side of forty.

"Hello! What made you come here?" The old man enquired being disconcerted. The man took a look at his face and became grave. Then he gave a laugh- God knows why. He tendered his casual regards. The old man seemed to have seen him somewhere many days back. But he could not remember anything about his home or job. In response to his curious gesture, the man freely said, "I belong to Baripada, Sir! I am serving in the Board Office here. You are unable to recall that I was at Dhenkanal while you were there".

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The old man started talking. 'Well, do you know a doctor who has newly joined at Baripada after freshly passing the course?" The query seemed to come from the inmost part of his body.

"Doctor?"

"Of course, a doctor."

"Yes, there is one." The man confirmed.

"So he is really there!" The old man came closer to him with a hearty laugh of satisfaction springing up from within. His white eye-brows were wrinkled. In exuberance of joy he disclosed, "Did I not say that there would be no dearth of grooms for my Mausumi?" The old man gave a terrific laugh opening his toothless mouth. Following a brief spell of soothing silence, he

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continued: "Well, there was a doctor at Ramchandrapur. I was tired of running after him. Considering my declining age and strength, am I any more capable of making extensive travel for collecting information? I don't have the ability either to offer twenty tolas of gold, a car or scooter. The daughter has been educated with M. A. degree. She is now left to her fate. She could be settled in marriage if a doctor were somewhere available. Well, my dear! Please tell me if the man you are speaking of is..."

The man pondered for sometime as though he was recollecting something important and replied, "Sir, a doctor is there at Baripada." The old man looked at his face and appeared to be hopeful.

"Is that doctor a good-natured man?" He waited for an answer.

"But..."

The old man seemed to be more disturbed than earlier. This time the man directly disapproved: "No, Sir! Marriage of your daughter with that doctor..." He felt hurt as the problem raised by the man was not agreeable. He became restless and burst out," Just say very frankly if the doctor is not well-born. Never mind. Has he no building at Cuttack or any highly placed relation in the capital?"

The old man was going to speak further. But the man interrupted: "Though that young doctor has been betrothed by several bridal parties, the girls could not be given away in marriage. He has been married twice. But his wife dies every time after a year of the marriage and he gets a fat amount of insured money. Then he would be looking out for a new bride for marriage. What is more, he has probably kept a nurse as concubine."

The old man could no more stand to hear. He plugged both his ears with his thin palms... Mausumi was out to visit the picture with her boy friends and had not returned. Had his wife been there, she would have kept watch over her. What a free life for the girl for merry-making! Mausumi played the role of heroine in the College Drama and received honours as College queen. With her jubilation the house throbbed with delight. But the day the old man returned from the NIRMALA NURSING HOME with his daughter, he had been robbed of the smile of his cheerful face.

Tears accumulated in the old man's eyes. The sun was setting in the west. There were hovels on the other side of the Rly. Station. That man took leave of him saying "Let me go, Sir!" The train moved. It seemed as if he felt a strong urge to kill someone presently by gagging. With remaining strength he clenched his fists and thrust them forward. But they seemed to return towards him. He felt as though his throat-pipe was strongly pressed. But the trembling palms of old age were not strong enough to strangle him. The palms slackened. Glowing before his eyes were two fire-flies coming out of some dark cavity of his brain full of despair and depression. And the beautiful face of Mausumi came swaying in that light. He remained sitting with closed eyes with a view to saving his beloved Mausumi from the various accidents threatening her. ■

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DIAMOND, PEARL AND GEM

Usha Ray

'How bold the girls of the present age are! Not money, but courage is their capital.'

■

SUVADRA DEVI was astonished to see Geetu coming down from a rickshaw in front of her house at seven in the morning. She rushed to the gate. As wife of a very top-ranking officer, she always used to call at her house by a car. Though related remotely as a niece, she held her in high esteem as the elder mother. She had been giving her regards from childhood. A pandal for the goddess was under construction in the village of Geetu during Dusserah. Goat sacrifice was in vogue there. Suvadra Devi put a stop to it by various tactical means. That is a very old story. Geetu has been giving respect to Suvadra Devi since then. As she grew up, she looked upon her as a guide of honour. She had sought her advice whenever necessary and got good result acting upon it. It was only at the time of the marriage of her daughter Reetu that her advice was not asked. She has consequently hastened to the residence of Suvadra Devi in the early morning.

Geetu opened the gate and came in. She held Suvadra Devi in an embrace and wept. Suvadra Devi was amazed. What was it that went wrong? Geetu was no doubt a jolly girl. What made her weep that day? Geetu's sob began to rise. "O elder mother! Gone am I to rack and ruin. Reetu has absconded from the house of her mother-in-law." Geetu complained. Suvadra Devi asked, "She fled away- that means she came to you?"

"She has not come to my house. She is putting up in a Women's Hostel. I have received a letter from her with a draft for fifty thousand rupees. She has sold out all her ornaments- her *streedhan*. What will be the future of Reetu? Do you think her mother-in-law will allow her to enter the house after this development?" Geetu reported this much and started weeping again. This is a problem of which Suvadra Devi has heard and thought a good deal. She had her individual experience to-day. Something has got to be done. She took down the hostel address from Geetu. Being relieved from worry with the feeling that her elder mother would find some solution or other, Geetu went back.

Suvadra Devi did not want Reetu to be married off so soon. Reetu was very good at her study. She was a student of Science and soon after her graduation, her mother settled her in marriage. It set Suvadra Devi thinking. Parents want to see their daughters confined in a cage of security. They go on making gradual provision step by step for earning and saving of money since the birth of their daughters. Geetu was no exception. Suvadra Devi opposed the idea of early marriage once or twice. But she had to own defeat with the irrefutable

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argument of Geetu. Beauty would be lost with age and grooms cannot be found. So the marriage was gorgeously solemnised and with customary pomp. There was large-scale feasting of dear and near ones with the community. From one to the other passed the rumour: "Well, one lakh rupees was offered, how would Geetu not find a good groom?" The offer of hard cash was somehow divulged. It was not known to anybody except the mothers-in-law of both the parties. So it is true that walls have ears. It came to the knowledge of everybody. Reetu too came to know it. She received a rude shock being idealistic and sensitive in temper. Her tender mind turned violent. Did she have no worth of her own then? Being strongly inclined to retaliate, she was able to break the convention. She paid no heed to the blame of the family and trampled under her feet the honour of her parents. Was it her boldness or foolhardines? Suvadra Devi however felt happy within. What emboldened the humble and docile girl to be defiant overnight? With what magic touch was glass turned into gem? Suvadra Devi, with Reetu's address, arrived at the hostel.

Reetu had left for office when Suvadra Devi reached the hostel. A student of Science, she had also completed the Computer course and got a job. On return from office she met Suvadra Devi and addressing her as elder mummy, held her in an embrace. She lifted her up as if she were a small child. Suvadra Devi looked at her face and tried to overcome the feeling of mental injury. There was no sign of depression on her face. It looked so bright. "You have turned into a heroine. Wherefrom did you gather so much courage and inspiration?" Suvadra Devi enquired. "Just from you." Sharp came the reply from Reetu. "I am your elder mummy and your mother's too. But we had no education or brains to get so much courage in our days", replied Suvadra Devi.

"Rot! Do we need any education or brain for courage? Irene Jacob has passed only matriculation. Her mother-in-law had accepted cash of ten thousand rupees from her father. The money had been arranged with a lot of trouble. Her father-in-law had sold out his village land and got twenty thousand rupees for purchasing a plot of land in the town, Irene took ten thousand rupees from this and offered to her mother. With big questioning eyes the mother looked upon her. She has taken refuge in the hostel." Reetu explained. Suvadra Devi had been watching Irene from her childhood. Her father was a very good stenographer. He taught her typing developing her ability to work. Irene did not look upon her work as undesirable. Rather she deemed it her duty. How bold the girls of the present age are! Not money, but courage is their capital. The mini Irene of those days! She accompanied her father to the residence of Suvadra Devi so many times. She was dark-complexioned with dense growth of curly hair on the head. Irene the Great-SuvadraDevi thought of congratulating her. Modern Irene is superior to Empress Catherine in greatness.

"So you are the source of inspiration for Reetu." Suvadra Devi, with an appreciative look at her, admiringly remarked. "No, Auntie! Samina is the boldest of us all. She has declared a war against the Muslim right to marry four wives." Irene humbly revealed. Suvadra Devi invited Samina to sit on her lap. Samina

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felt as though she was the ten-handed goddess. Three women friends were lying on three beds close to each other. What strong will despite a lot of break and wreck of life! Parallel to the river of blood flowed the transparent stream of their life with a smooth current. ■

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HOUSE OF OUR OWN

Manindra Kumar Meher

'To Asha Devi the heavy tone of Anurag seemed heavier still."

■

ANURAG BABU was on the threshold of the fourteenth year of his marriage. He had been throughout struggling with the boat of his life. He was burdened with four dependants. A petty clerk of the court, he had limited income with which he ceaselessly struggled to meet the high cost of living. While returning home from office, he used to visualise his unavoidable family obligations. Trusting to the divine gift of his two feet, he would come all the way home walking with much pleasure.

With the approach of evening, he hastened his steps to-day being drawn by the tie of filial affection. The moment he stepped into the house, Rabi addressed his father repeatedly complaining, "The house-owner gave good snubbing to mother in the morning. Has he not received the rent due, father?"

Shabi and Ranu listened to Rabi and they too repeated the same thing as a token of regard for their mother. Anurag Babu unconsciously heaved a sigh of sadness.

"Papa! If the house-rent is not paid within four to six days, he has threatened to evict us." Ranu made it clear.

Anurag Babu heard all their complaints. "As long as we don't have a house of our own, we have got to put up with all this, there being no alternative for us." He aimed the remark at Asha Devi after a while.

Asha who bore with everything hopefully fixed her look on her husband. "So we are going to build a house of our own, father?" Ranu wanted to confirm.

Anurag Babu became grave. However much he tried to conceal his inability from his children, there was no escape from it. Depression was writ large on his face.

He listened to Ranu and tried to give a smile. "Sure, we are positively getting one." He gave the assurance.

"Where is it being constructed?" asked Shabi.

"I am on the look-out for a piece of land. It must be purchased."

"Please don't forget to provide for me a reading room in the new house to be constructed." Rabi entreated his father.

"Sure, all that is to be satisfied."

"The entire family at once lost themselves in the dream of their house. Turning her look to her husband, Asha Devi said, "so we are going to build a

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house, isn't it?"

"Yes. How else shall we manage, Asha? There has been enough of trouble."

"See, we are having a house. But let it not be of an unmanageable dimension." Asha Devi suggested.

"Rest assured of it. Well, how many rooms do you think would be desirable?" Anurag Babu consulted her.

Asha gave a little thought to it and replied: "Is it five? Yes, just five rooms will do. No use having more rooms. One drawing room, a bed-room, a store, a reading room and a kitchen. That's all. Latrine and bath are bound to be there."

"Yes, the drawing room is to be nicely decorated with sofa set and a small table at the centre. A table-cloth with the flower-vase made by mother. Just like the arrangement at Balabhadra Babu's residence, dear father!' Rabi suddenly came forward with this suggestion directed towards his father.

"Right. But a black and white table-cloth would give the flower-vase a decent look, isn't it so, father?" Ranu offered her comment.

"Sure, that will look very excellent, dear mummy! But you have not mentioned the pictures to be hung up there." The eyes of Anurag filled with feelings of love and amusement both.

Rabi, Shabi and Ranu simultaneously started giving the names of great souls.

"Well, my kiddies! You are not to mention all at a time. Speak out one by one. All right, Rabi! What pictures are to be displayed?" Directing all of them to keep quiet, Anurag Babu proceeded together.

Ranu insisted on speaking first. Shabi complained that Rabi would mention the names of many great souls if once asked.

"Very well, let us allow Ranu to speak first. Shabi will follow and I will be the last." Rabi made this concession on hearing their grievances.

"Yes, act accordingly. Don't make a scene unnecessarily. Sc you had better speak out, Ranu." Asha Devi tried to convince her children like this in her soft tone.

Ranu's throat dried up while she could name none except Madhu Babu and Gopabandhu. She had read about the said two characters in her text-book. She pressed Anurag Babu to positively hang up their portraits.

"The portraits of Fakirmohan, Radhanath, Madhusudan and Gangadhar are also to be put up there, dear father! They are the scintillating stars of the Oriya literary firmament. And, dear father, the photo of the world poet Rabindranath is sure to find a place there." Shabi furnished these names establishing the stupidity of Ranu.

"See, Ranu and Shabi gave names of poets only, dear father! We have to

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display the portraits of Netaji, Bapuji and Chachaji as well. It is they who brought freedom to our country." Rabi remarked.

When everything was heard, Anurag Babu concluded: "They are all bright stars of our country, isn't it so Shabi?" Shabi consented.

"Ranu will be like Madhu Babu and Gapabandhu, I can understand, Asha! She has remembered their names first. And Shabi will be a poet." Anurag Babu turned his looks to Asha devi with a smile and remarked.

"And what about Rabi?" asked Asha Devi. "He will launch a fight for the country, if necessary." Anurag Babu gave a brief comment.

Rabi, Shabi and Ranu were delighted to hear the prediction of their parents about their future.

"So this is all about the verandah to the drawing room. To the left of it would be the room for god worship, the bed-room and store. To the right is to be put up the reading room for children. Behind would be the bath and attached latrine." Asha Devi went on with the details.

While Anurag Babu was all praise for Asha's plan, there was jubilation among all.

"And, mind you, we shall have a small garden in front of the house where there will be varieties of flowers. We shall fetch water and pour it down the plants. Our children will be there to help us. We shall be seated there in the evening and talk to one another like this. And a boundary wall is to be put up around the garden. How nice it will look!" observed Asha Devi.

"Sure, we shall build a house- a House of our Own. Suddenly they became aware of the position. "Well, Asha! The night is probably far advanced. Have you got the food ready?"

"There was no rice in stock today. Two 'manas' of rice was taken on credit from Manda's mother to prepare food."

"Well, let the kiddies be fed." Saying this Anurag Babu proceeded to the bed-room. On the verandah the three children made a row for some petty reason.

To Asha Devi the heavy tone of Anurag seemed heavier still. ■

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THE TRADITIONAL COURSE

Manoj Pujari

'Everywhere he would hear people remark, "Leave it. Marriage is like a Pandora's box. It is a necessary evil giving us deceptive joy, raising false-hope. You regret when married. Not being married also brings repentance.'

He felt the urge to reply, "Exactly true! How true!"

■

It was driven home to him that further delay was not at all desirable. To remain indifferent to the issue even after crossing the thirtieth year had absolutely no logic behind it. He was queried left and right while the point was being explained. The posers appeared to be ridiculous and irrelevant to him. "Hello! Won't you fete us at dinner?" His friends who were married with children used to enquire. The seniormost brother-in-law observed, "There is nothing in it to worry over so much. All trouble will be resolved." " Is there any sister to be given in marriage?" colleagues of the office asked, being curious. He would shake his head in denial. In consternation they pursued, "Then?".

"See, my dear nephew, what's there to be concealed from me? Are you in love with somebody and there is no reciprocation?" His uncle affectionately sounded him and he would contradict it. Mother used to come to his rented house at times and remain there for two to four days. She was terribly fed up with him. She would cater food and tidy up the house. "Why don't you tell me straight", she persistently asked. With a smile followed the reply "What's there for me to say?"

A Lecturer who taught him at the college used to come to his office. He received help and his object was smoothly achieved. While taking tea at the canteen, the Lecturer with protruding teeth told him smilingly with teeth exposed, "I am, however, very much delighted to see you here. Well, ain't you married?" He shook his head in denial. The Lecturer (with a gesture showing that he could understand his problem) started counselling him with a smile, "Pooh! What makes you so afraid of marriage? There is a fear psychosis with many people, ha! ha! But that is entirely puerile. Well, if there is any trouble we are there to tender advice free of cost, ha! ha!" He listened to him and just laughed.

Father who was growing older just like his other counterparts wrote letters asking him to realise the gravity of the problem. But he was feeling helpless. Days, weeks and months rolled by under such conditions. Season changed with calender pages turned over.

His mother dropped in one fine morning being very much exasperated. She protested that as long as he refused to marry, she would keep on fasting. He would lightly smile at the idea of fasting of his mother and observe- "Why do

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you behave like a child, mummy?" She heeded not his words and actually started fasting. Being perturbed, he would assure his mother, "All right, call off fasting, mummy. I shall honour your suggestion." Tears of joy would trickle down her eyes. She then disclosed how worried she felt over her son.

With the consent obtained from him, every one felt happy. Consultations poured in. The plus and minus side of marrying a girl in service was borne in upon him. Similarly possible advantages and disadvantages of marrying an unemployed girl too were impressed upon him.

His elder sisters were teachers. They would dissuade him from marrying any girl doing a job. "Unless both husband and wife earn money, it is difficult to manage in the present situation." The brothers-in-law and uncles continued.

The photos of brides were received. It was mother's responsibility to match the horoscope. A prospective bride would be found short in stature whereas another was found dark-complexioned. Offer would come from a sonless family with daughter only and the proposal was rejected. A bride would be found acceptable satisfying various criteria except that her father was a drunkard. Another bride who was exceedingly beautiful and highly qualified was offered but her younger sisters were all married away. How is it that her marriage was not solemnised then? The proposal was dropped. X X X X X X

A proposal given by the elder sister was in rapid progress but it would suddenly be revealed that the bride's mother was slightly off the track. The daughter might acquire the same trouble. So consideration was out of question.

X X X X

A proposal unanimously accepted by all members of the family was communicated to him. And photo too was shown. He gave a look at it and said, "When all of you have made the choice what more have I got to say?"

The date was fixed and marriage was held with due formalities. Everybody attending the dinner wished a happy conjugal life. Then he started living his life in an altogether different style.

There was no matching of his taste and outlook with those of his wife. The newlywed wife would always sit before the T. V. seeing the film with dancing and singing. He was annoyed and asked for reducing the volume. His reading of books was disturbed. He went on visiting the Saree Centre, Jewellery and Cosmetic Shop and Beauty Parlour riding the scooter with his wife seated behind him. X X X X X X X X X

His life-partner started grumbling, "Why, did I, for God's sake, marry one like him?" He kept quiet. Everywhere he would hear people remark, "Leave it. Marriage is like a Pandora's box. It is a necessary evil giving us deceptive joy, raising false hope. You regret when married. Not being married also brings repentance."

He felt the urge to reply, "Exactly true! How true!"

X X X X

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After a long gap his elder brother would suddenly drop in one fine morning and complained that he hadn't cared to look after the house, land and his parents since his marriage. He remembered that he had for long not sent any money to his parents living in the village. After his brother left, an L.I.C. Agent arrived who was after him for a pretty long time. He pleaded with him to go in for a Policy at once now that he had got married. He gave his consent and the Agent explained to him various aspects of different policies.

"See, we two shall apply for a plot. Sahu Babu's better half said that there is such publication in some paper or other to-day. There is no doubt that the provision of facility for payment by instalment is there. The loan will be repaid with no inconvenience. There will be trouble if we don't plan for the future from now." His wife would drive home the point to him. And he would reply, "We shall see to it."

To write letters to friends and read journals or to practise Yoga or go for morning walk, etc. would by degrees become a thing of the past. Going to office and coming back home and marketing took up all his time and he felt that both day and night became shorter in duration.

One day his wife's head was reeling followed by vomiting. Other troubles were detected by phases. She was a trifle apprehensive and looked worried. She used to rush to Hospital, Nursing Home and Medical Stores. There was operation as normal delivery was ruled out. A daughter was born ending all tension. It was felt that she was not happy after recovering her senses. She appeared to be relieved with no reaction. He returned home with his wife and daughter. There was an onrush of parents, brother and brother-in-law with sister-in-law to give a look at the new arrival. He became increasingly worried. He felt as though he had been converted from a man into a machine.

The L.I.C. Agent called on him after a long spell and advised him to get a new and attractive policy issued in favour of the newborn daughter. He left off reading the book "Baby Care" and listened to the Agent. "So shall I come in the first week, sir?" The Agent would ask before leaving him. "All right, you may come." He assented and resumed reading of the book from the place he had left off. ■

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HISTORIC PENSION CASE

Netrananda Pujari

'Angels were there
to help you and are still ready to.
Refuse not God's grace.
'Goodness tempered with wisdom' is the
excellent motto of life... Enough is enough."

■

THE scooty stopped slowly at the gate of my neighbour. I was, as usual, looking at the passers-by to pass the time. My attention was at once diverted to the man coming from the house in front to receive the visitor smiling at him. Both moved to the drawing room and started talking in an atmosphere of warmth and cordiality.

"Well, how do you manage to live on? The P. P. O. you were talking of never arrives, Anand. Strange really is the style of functioning of Government machinery." Sreeman, with a heavy heart, went on enquiring after him. Anand's pleasure knew no bounds brought on by this sympathetic gesture.

"Processing of papers is a time-consuming affair. Understand, Sreeman! I am strongly opposed to palm-greasing, you know. But I am sure, mine is an eligible case, payment being justified as per pension rules. Let's then wait and see." Anand's explanation and words of hope and self-confidence soothed his tormented heart. I heard them talk. The visitor was visibly concerned. The prospective pensioner's look was one of helplessness though his voice betokened firmness.

"Here is one thousand. More if you need. Left alone? Don't you feel estranged? Why don't you acquaint me with your position at intervals? Your circumstances are really mystifying. I wonder how long you have to wait to get your pension."

"But when am I to repay this amount of money? "Anand interrupted.

"Don't worry. Let me go!" With his characteristic cool and composed manners Sreeman left the house. When the lone inmate of the house came to the gate to see him off, tears of joy trickled down his cheeks with his high sense of relief and gratitude.

For a long spell Sreeman made no call. His "darshan" of Darshan Babu was felt need which he could not afford to ignore. The other day he was seen amidst a group of people sitting around Darshan Babu in a small, cosy, improvised room attached to his business firm. The visitors left the place one by one. Sreeman and Darshan Babu, ever enjoying each other's company,

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resumed discussion of a topic of some relevance to Anand. They were intimate friends of my neighbour. After a break of short duration they found him entering the compound of the firm and slowly proceeding towards them. Usual greetings followed. Some grave, unpleasant issue cropped up for discussion on which the considered opinion of Sreeman slipped from his lips. That was a silencer for Darshan and my neighbour as well. It was subsequently disclosed that though Darshan and my neighbour both had for long been meeting each other at the usual daily "get-together" of friends in that cosy sitting room of the firm, the latter left off visiting the place since the "Judgement" of Sreeman was passed. My neighbour is convinced that difference of opinion or dissent is one's birth-right, but disagreement does not make friends disagreeable warranting parting of ways.

X X X X

Meanwhile with the help of many friends and well-wishers, Anand repeatedly approached the pension-sanctioning authorities in the State Capital and convinced them with strong grounds (citing pension rules and precedents) that payment of pension to him was overdue. His mission succeeded at long last. It was an uphill, Herculean task. The media started flashing his heroic fight. The well-wishers shouted with joy "Three Cheers" for him.

Sreeman, as was expected of him, arrived at my neighbour's residence on receipt of this good news. Returning his compliments with a cheerful face, he spoke him laconically in his sober and dignified voice something of particular relevance to human life:

"Anand", he began, "while you were Lecturer of a Govt. College on P. S. C. recommendation, I told you not to resign whatever the grounds. That landed you in trouble. However you have been providentially helped to tide over the crisis. Angels were there to help you and are still ready to. Refuse not God's grace. 'Goodness tempered with wisdom' is the excellent motto of life. The unwritten 'BOOK OF LIFE' demonstrates it."

He went on:

"Says Milton: 'God doth not need man's work... His state is kingly... They also serve who only stand and wait.' Enough is enough. Now start living in peace- relaxed and free from thankless obligations." ■

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-: ERRATA :-

Page	Para/Line	For	Read
I	1/4		'L to R' after 4th line ends
III	1/4	work	word
VI	1/9	be	by
VI	3/1		story after 'short'
23	2/16	him	me
27	2/3	on	in
28	8/3	I	he
39	Last/2	or	to
41	9/1	along	a long
56	Last/Last	as	an
61	3/2		omitting 'a'
62	4/4	unto	into
80	2/3		to after 'spoke'

(Errors and Omissions are regretted - Publisher)

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